how to think about
COMPOSITION

zoe jay

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I. INTRODUCTION

what is composition?

First, what exactly do we mean when we talk about an image's composition? It's an extremely broad concept. For our purposes, whenever I say 'composition' what I'm referring to is simply the way that visual elements within an image are positioned. This applies not just to painting or illustration, but to photography, film, television, animation, graphic design, etcetera.

It may be tempting to say that an image is well-composed when it is balanced, harmonious, pleasing, has a certain level of visual clarity, or any other such positive description, and in fact that's probably the common conception, but we're going to throw that baby out with the bathwater. I invite you to think about it like this: if people are inclined to look at the parts of your drawing that you want them to look at, you've done a good job with your composition. If your composition evokes the feeling you want it to evoke, you've done a good job. Even if it fits outside the traditional boundaries of what 'good' composition is. Missing the mark is one thing – aiming for something other than the painted target is an entirely different matter.

There may be plenty of times in your life when you want to create an image that doesn't inspire a list of positive adjectives in people, and I'd like to empower you to feel confident in that decision as well. A lot of art tutorials feel really geared towards making polished art, semi-professional art, art that could sell, art that would get traction on social media, whatever, and that's all great. But let's not limit ourselves. Let's have some room for hostile, irregular, and unpalatable art as well.

Essentially, what I want to provide you with is not any sort of guidelines, but rather a tool to use as you see fit. And that tool... is the human imagination. Wow.

general advice

- This much Instruction can feel overwhelming all in one place, but try breaking it down into bite-size pieces. If you're working on a piece that is purposefully geared towards gaining a better understanding of one specific concept, don't toss in a bunch of new techniques at this point as well. Stay focused on that one concept. Composition is a very holistic process so improving one area will instinctively improve others.

- Use these concepts to refine your pieces rather than outright construct them. I'm of the firm belief that honing your instincts is the most important part of the artistic process, and you can't hone your instincts if you're ignoring them. A lot of what I do here will be breaking down compositions, rather than building them up. Understanding what does or doesn't work in a piece and why is one of the most important things you can learn, as it'll allow you to course-correct within your own tastes. Draft the way you normally would, and then return to those drafts with a newfound critical eye.

- Less is often more. I've found simpler, more striking compositions to be more functional and better received overall. Aim for clarity of concept over filling space for the sake of it.

II. BASICS

I want this to be as beginner-friendly as possible, so I'm going to cover the absolute basics really quickly just to make sure we're all on the same page. Anything mentioned in this section is stuff you can read about in more depth pretty much anywhere if you do some light Googling. This is going to be long and I'd rather focus on advice that I feel is more specialized to my process. Feel free to skip ahead to part III if you've been around the block, but I'd highly recommend looking at the 'Flow' section. It's something very pivotal to my understanding of composition. I'll also be introducing some concepts and vocabulary in this section, so if you skip forward and see some confusing wording later on you can try looking for it back here.

positive and negative space

I think the first, most critical thing to understand about composition is the concept of positive and negative space. As with many elements of composition, this is something that takes moments to learn but has no end to its potential. Essentially, positive space is where there's Stuff happening in your image. Negative space is the space between all that stuff. It's one of art's nasty little tricks that not only does the stuff have to look good, it also helps if the empy space between that stuff looks good too. I'll talk a bit more about how to actually utilize your positive and negative space later on in the sections on shape, but as a primer, here's a basic introduction to conceptualizing it.

I've sketched up a couple of simple compositions for illustrative purposes. They're split into positive space (dark green) and negative space (light green). Even without the details within any given shape, you can still more or less make out what's happening because the overall shape of the positive space – the silhouette – is clear.

In the first example, the positive space is mostly in the lower portion of the image, and all that empty negative space up top is interrupted with the figure, giving it a nice balance.

In the second, we see a person at the beach. The negative space is less prominent, and most of it can be found in the sort of rectangular shape in the middle, surrounding that figure. The fact that most of the empty space is right there allows us to immediately pinpoint the figure before we get too concerned with anything else happening here.

In this third and final example, the negative space made between the towers and flag ends up taking a vaguely triangular or arrowhead shape most of the time, pairing well with the arrow shape of the towers themselves. It keeps a feeling of upward movement in the whole thing.

Next we're going to look at and then discuss from some examples from a piece of media that uses compositions with heavy negative space extremely well: Revolutionary Girl Utena. RGU is an absolute masterpiece of a show, and its visuals have been heavily influential on both western and Japanese animators for very good reasons.

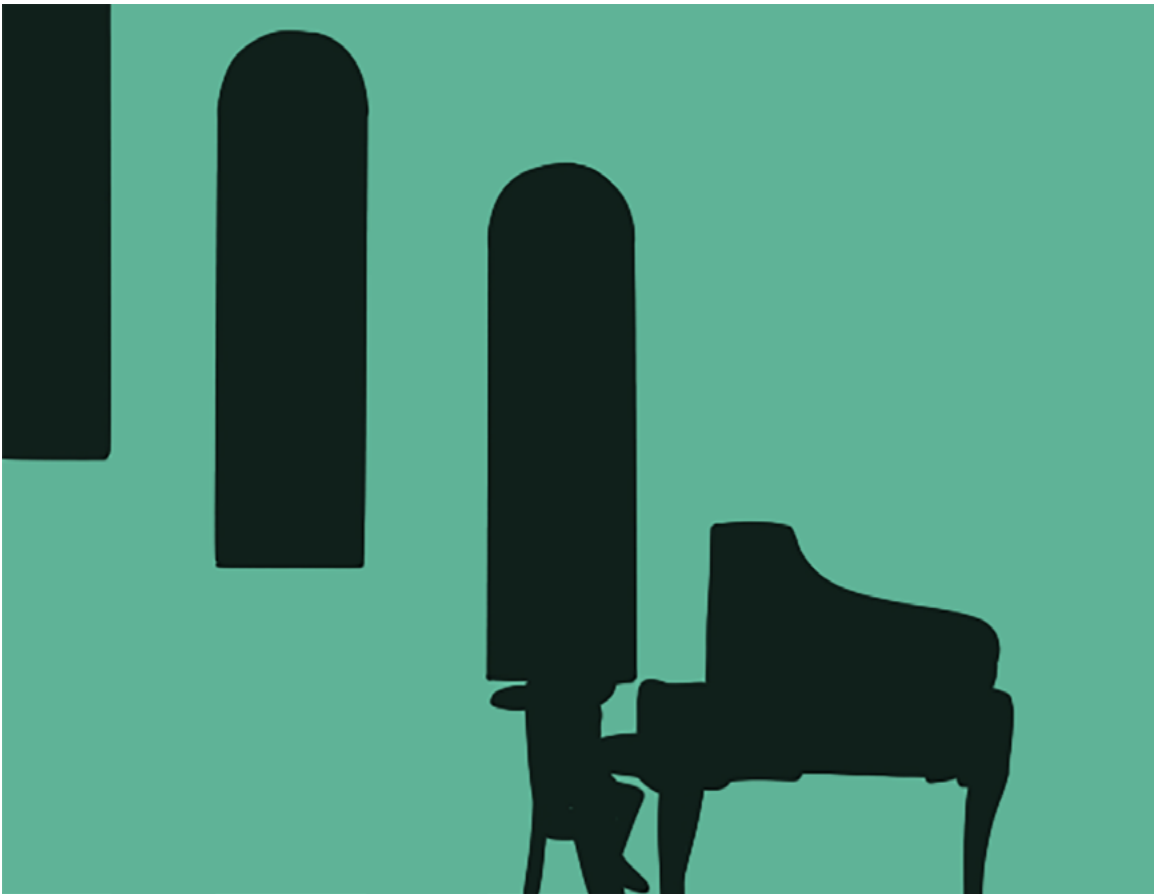The following screenshots were all sourced from <u>Ohtoru.nu's gallery.</u>
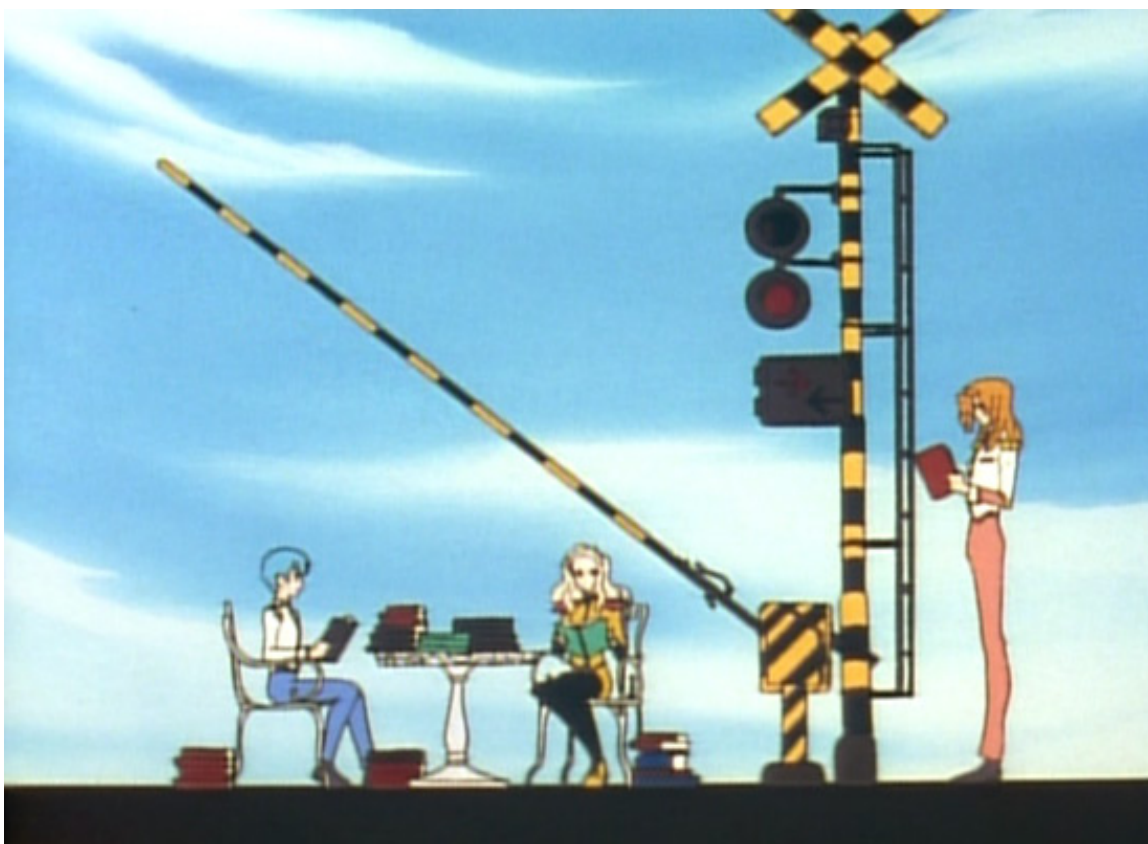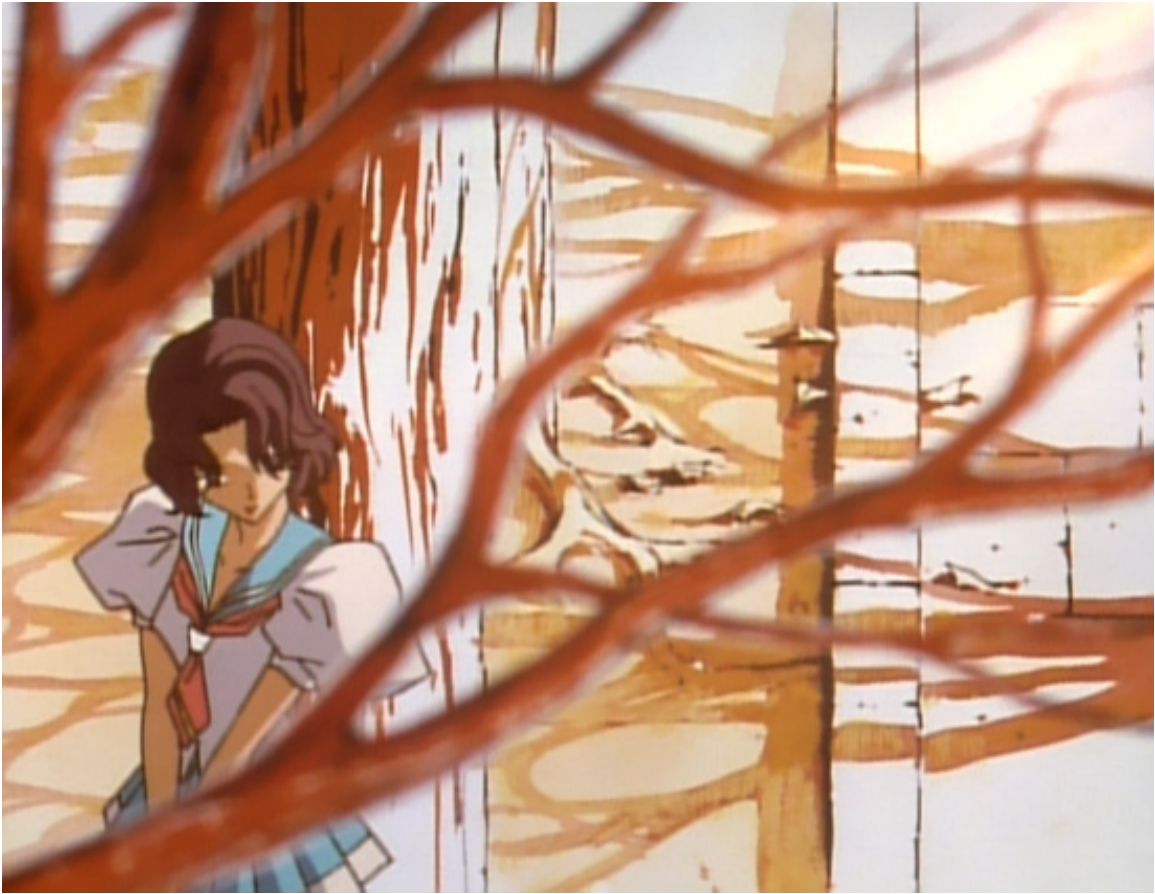

a screenshot from episode 22
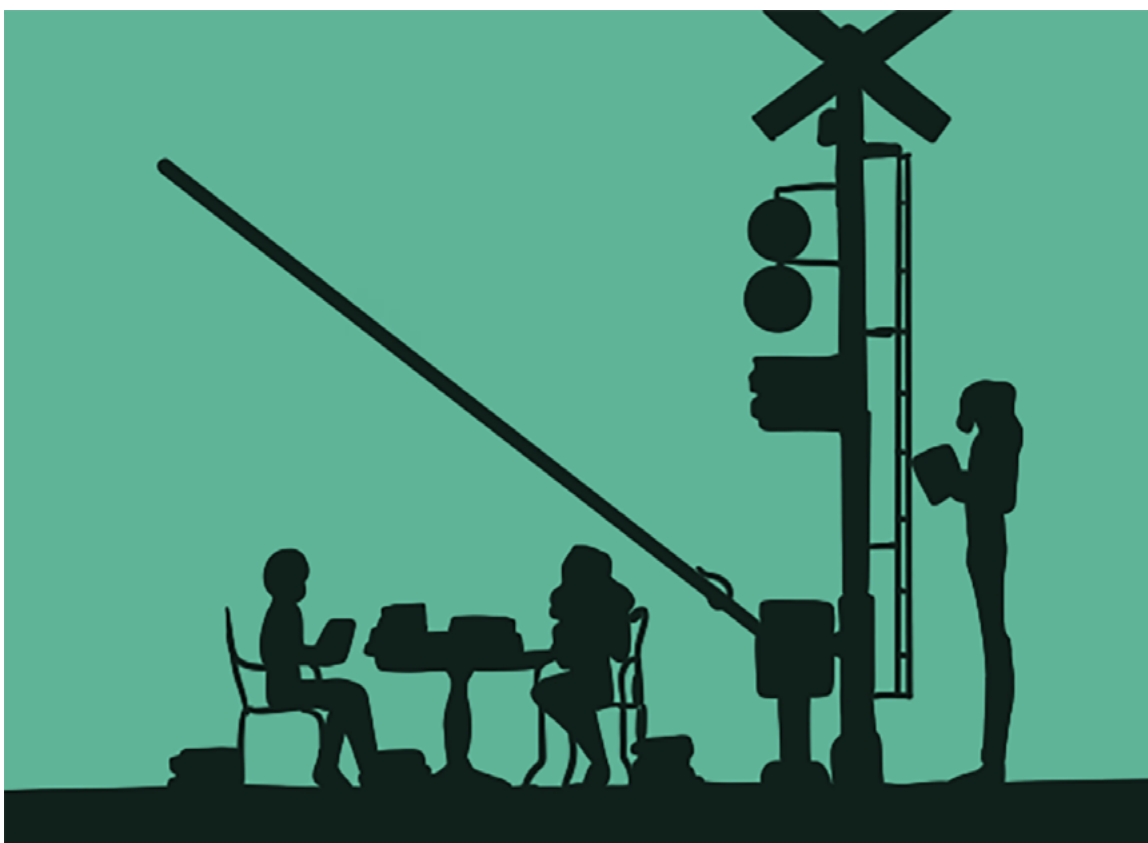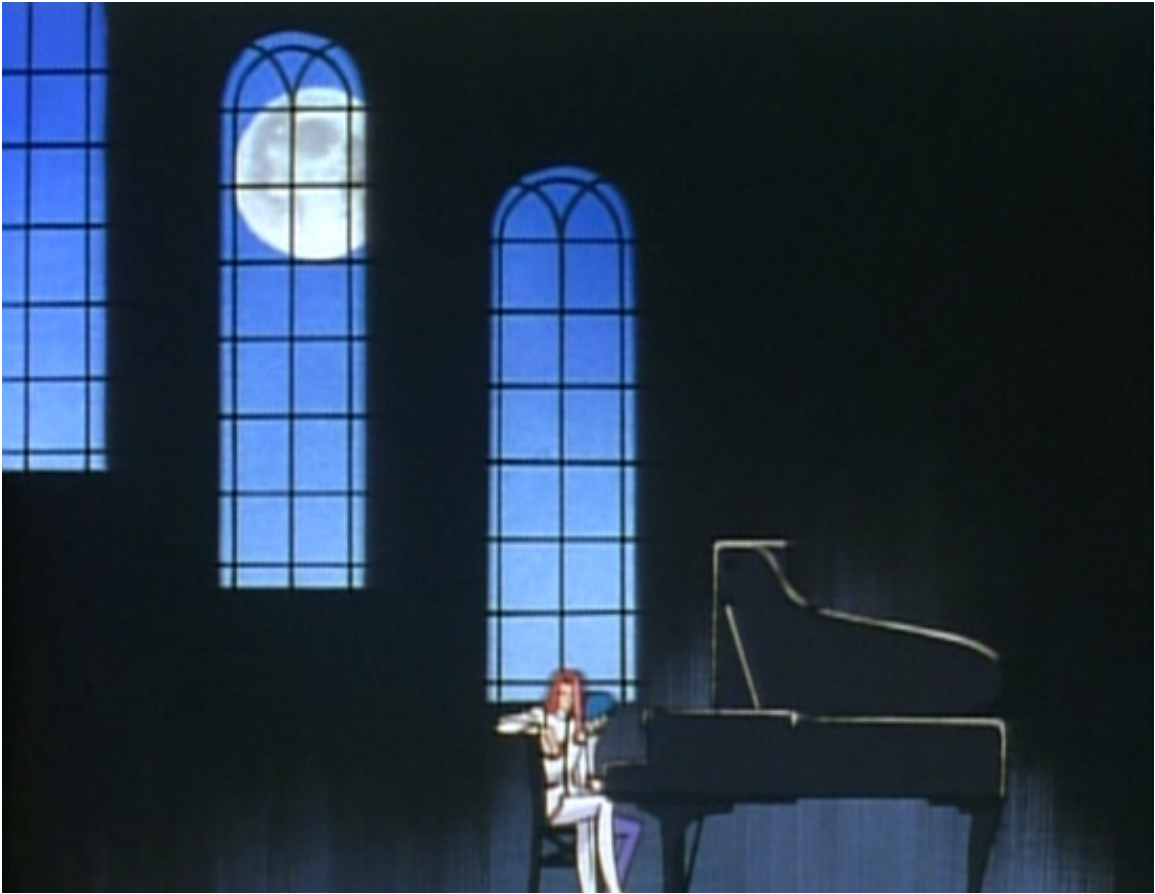
a screenshot from episode 26

a screenshot from episode 12

a screenshot from episode 29
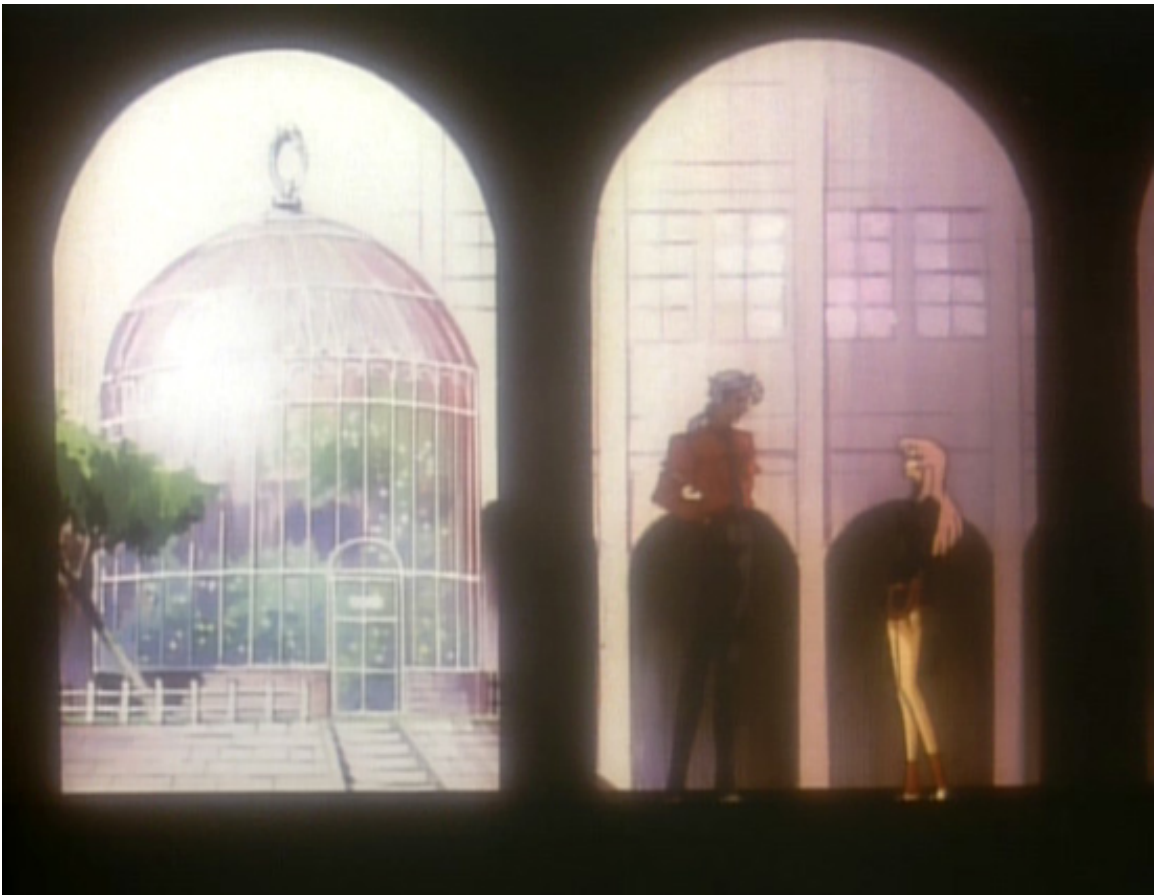
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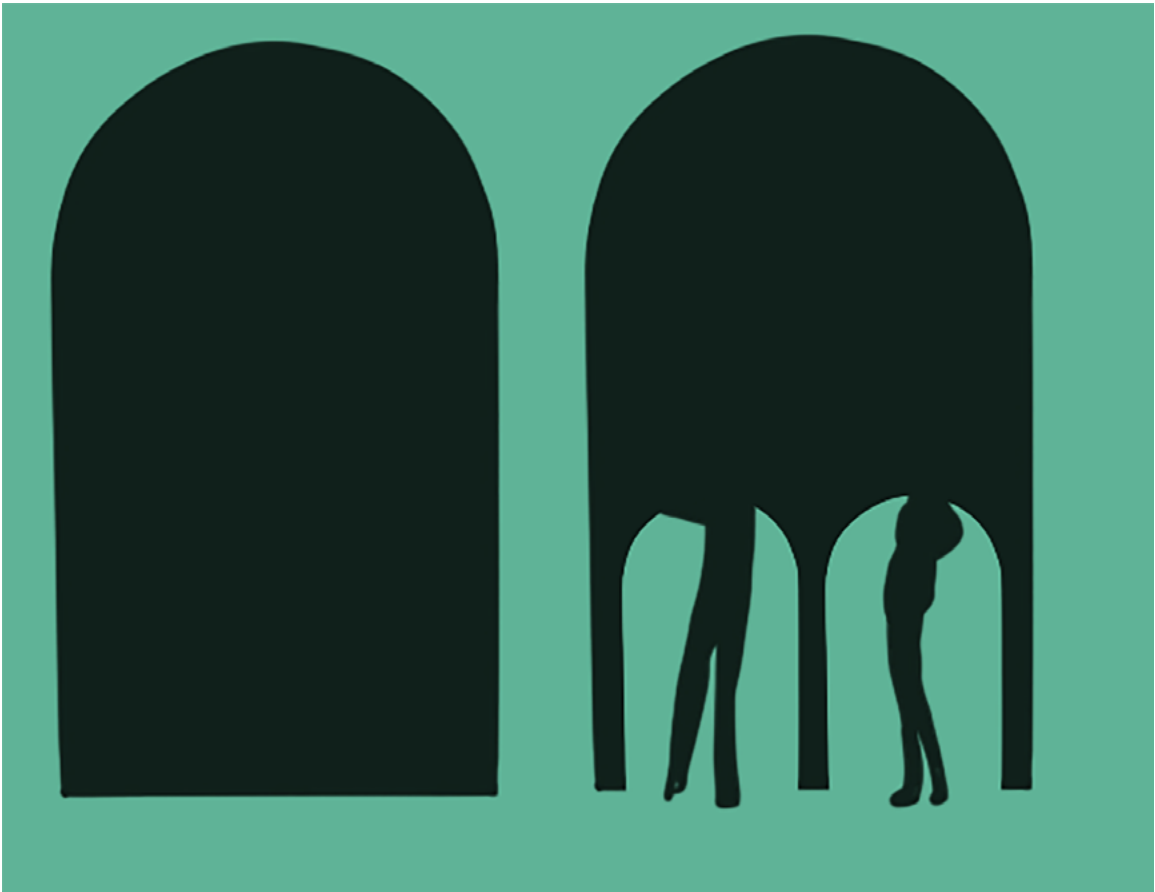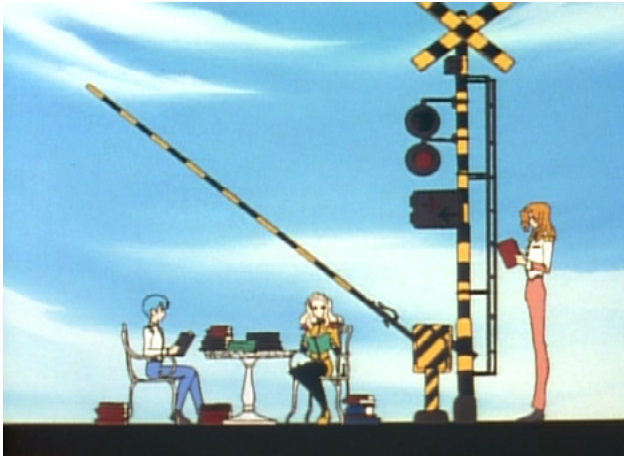
In this first example, the space is filled out incredibly well. Everything in the image still reads clearly even without any internal detail. Pleasing visuals all aroundl. The clouds are ignored here as part of the positive space; they're understood as part of the backdrop and don't hold the same weight as everything else in the image.
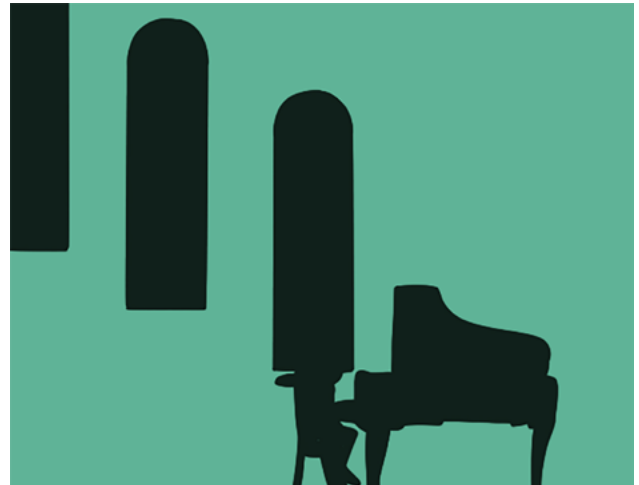
In the second example, we're now working with an interior. Yet again there's a lot of visually pleasing stuff happening here, and you can still tell what's happening without internal details of each shape. There's not much to say about these because they're rather simple, but the next few examples have a slightly more layered use of space.

Previously, all of the visuals have been more or less on the same plane with very little overlap. Here we have one figure that's quite clearly much closer to the camera than the other. Despite that, we can still easily make out what's happening in this image. We can also see how all of the complexity is gathered right there in the middle area. The positive and negative space elsewhere is all very simple, but right where we're supposed to look the visuals are the most elaborate. The next example is slightly more ambiguous.

There isn't just a mostly blank background here like in the others. We've got the shadows on the ground that look super similar to the actual branches of the tree itself. So how do we reckon with the use of space in the backdrop? The answer is, we more or less just don't. Or at least I don't. Positive and negative space is best understood when you think of it as a visual framing device. The shadows on the ground and the branches of the tree look very similar, but the branches are framing the image. The shadows on the ground are insigifiicant details within that frame.
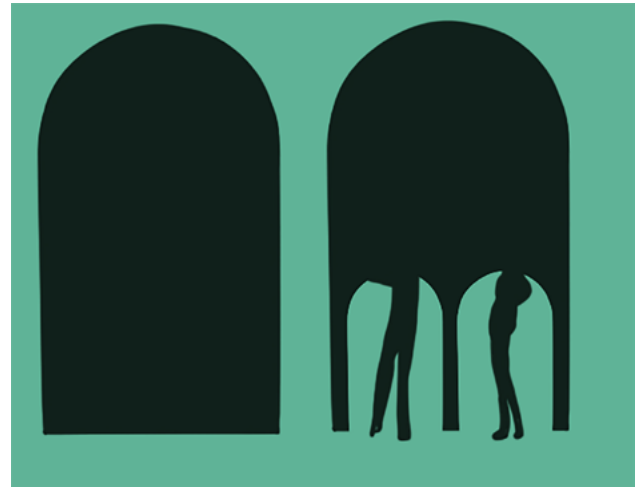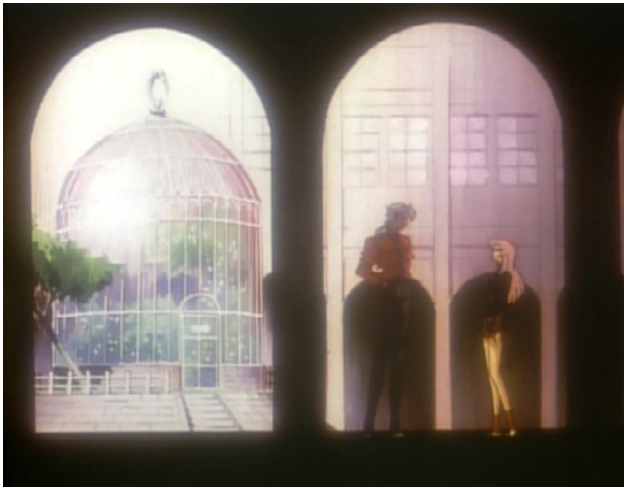
Last one. A shot I really love. Kind of difficult to conceptualize in terms of negative/positive space, because what immediately reads as negative space working under our definition of 'place where there's no stuff' is the archway they're standing under. If we think about it that way, we get something kind of like the image on the right. But I have to admit, I have mislead you here, because this layout of positive and negative space does nothing to explain what's happening in this layout. It does it a huge disservice. Let's try again and rethink our conception of negative and positive space. What are the actual objects of importance in this shot? Here's what our second pass looks like.

Now isn't that a bit better! Once again, this shows why thinking of space in terms of framing is the most helpful. Although the arches are technically empty space, we're meant to understand them as objects that are critical to the visual of the scene. Same with the birdcage-shaped greenhouse. It's the school walls in the background that serve as the inconsequential detail in

this composition, even though they're technically 'stuff' in a way the arches aren't. Don't get too stuck in overly literal types of thinking when breaking down an image. All 2d imagery – even something fully realistic like a photograph – is an abstraction of reality. You need to think abstractly to fully engage with it. Next we'll be moving on to a closely related concept.

background, middleground, foreground

Traditionally, depth in a composition is thought of in three distinct areas. Rather than thinking of your image as one big tangle of visual elements, it can really help to mentally split it up into these three chunks. It allows you to break down your composition into manageable pieces, letting you assess the way space is used at each level of depth. This is nuance you lose when your only consideration is negative and positive space.

Blue is the foreground, what's closest to the 'camera'. Red is midground. Yellow is the background. I've included the internal detail here with different shades of yellow and red, because unlike positive and negative space, you don't need to think about your background, middle ground, and foreground solely in terms of silhouette. Now we can understand what's going on in this image in a way we couldn't before.

In the above image, our focal area is in the foreground. Normally the primary focal elements will be in the foreground or middle ground. It's rarer to have a focal element in the background, but not any sort of faux-pas. It's just a little bit counterintuitive.

The extra level of detail here allows us to see the two secondary figures in the foreground. Despite adding more figures, the focal point remains on the figure in the middle ground, due to how the space is actually being used.

Not much changes in this image after splitting it up like this, as the respective sizes of the towers made the depth very obvious even in silhouette. However, the bottom third of the image is no longer just a solid block, which makes it feel less heavy and cramped down there.

We'll be briefly revisiting our Utena screenshots next.
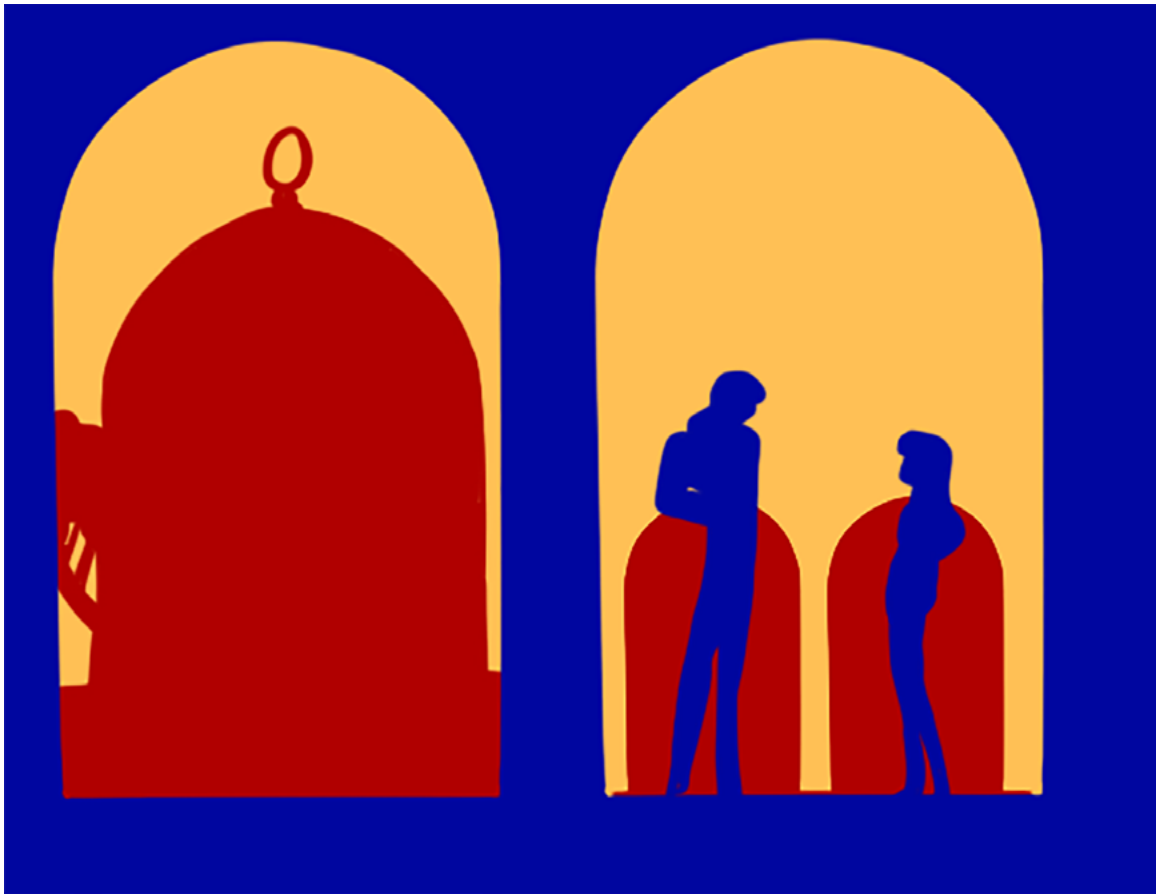
In this final example, we once again have to bridge a gap between the literal interpretation of the space and the compositionally useful one. I'm including those two archways as part of the 'middle ground' even though they're technically further back than what I've marked off the back-ground, as they're recessed into that wall. This is because, as said, we're working with an abstracted interpretation of space. The wall is mostly an insignificant backdrop. The arches are an active visual element in the scene. As such, I choose to interpret them as a middle ground element.

rule of thirds

One of the simplest and most versatile principles of composition. The rule of thirds is a great thing to fall back on if you find yourself in need of a little more appeal or interest in your compositions. It's an excellent short-cut to balance and harmony in a composition.

If you post art on social media a lot, you might notice you've become inclined to let your subject matter fill your canvas so it's not too small to make out in an image preview or mobile display. Keeping the rule of thirds in mind is a great way to course correct that and give your subject matter some breathing room.
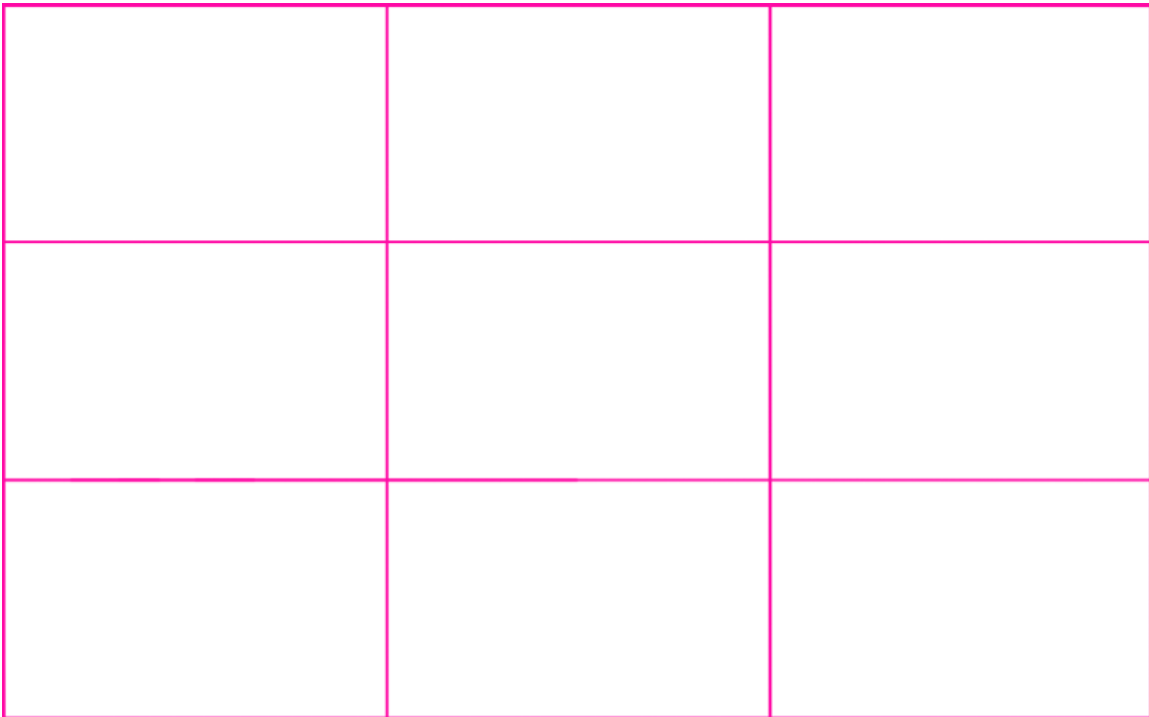
Imagine a 3x3 grid like the one above on top of your artwork. The proportion here isn't important; it could be thinner and taller, completely square, etc. As long as it's being split into thirds both horizontally and vertically. When composing by the rule of thirds, you'll want to place your focal point roughly on one of the four places where the interior lines intersect.

Any major verticals, like a person standing straight, should be placed on or near the two vertical lines. Any major horizontals, like the horizon line, should be placed on or near either of the two horizontal lines. This helps ensure there's a pleasant amount of negative space surrounding these visual elements.

There's a strong chance you've come across the fibonacci "golden spiral" at one point or another. You might have even seen it slapped on top of some compositions. The rule of thirds is actually just a simplification of these proportions. Here's the golden spiral split into thirds:
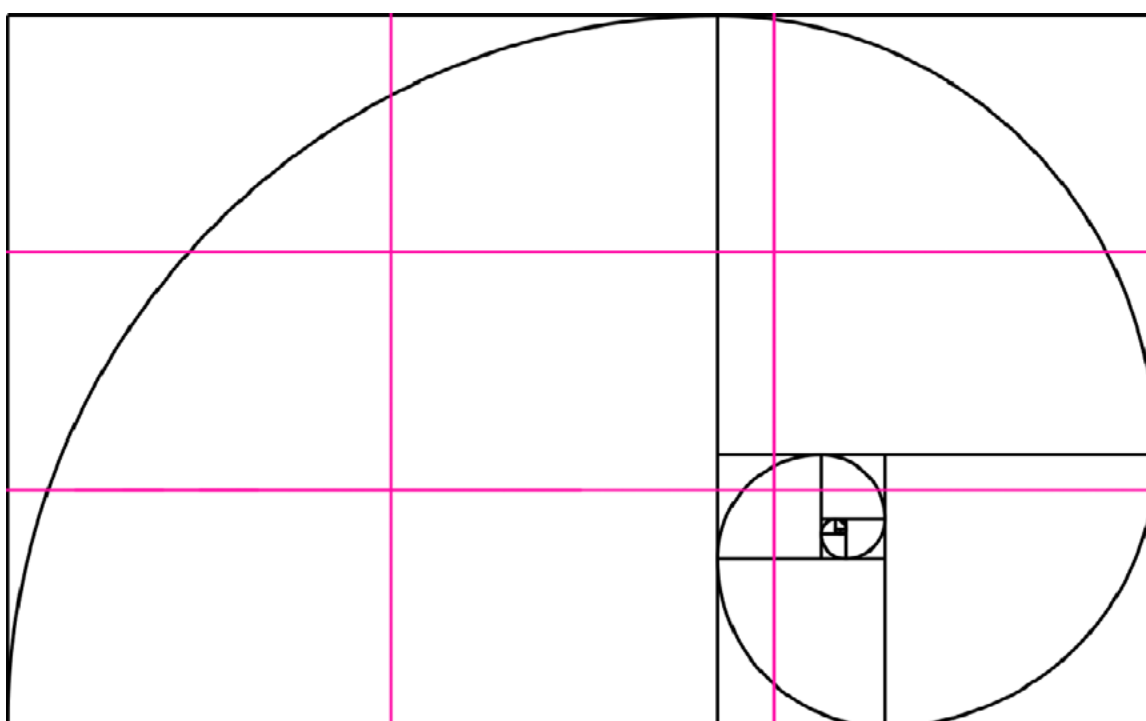
See how close the focal points are to each other in the bottom right there? Having it match up with the other three intersections is just a matter of flipping it either way. The golden spiral is mathematically precise, though. Unlike the rule of thirds, it can't be skewed to different proportions without losing its inherent properties. That's why the rule of thirds is just a much more convenient way to position your focal points. So, how about let's look at the same compositions we've been using as examples with these grids on them.
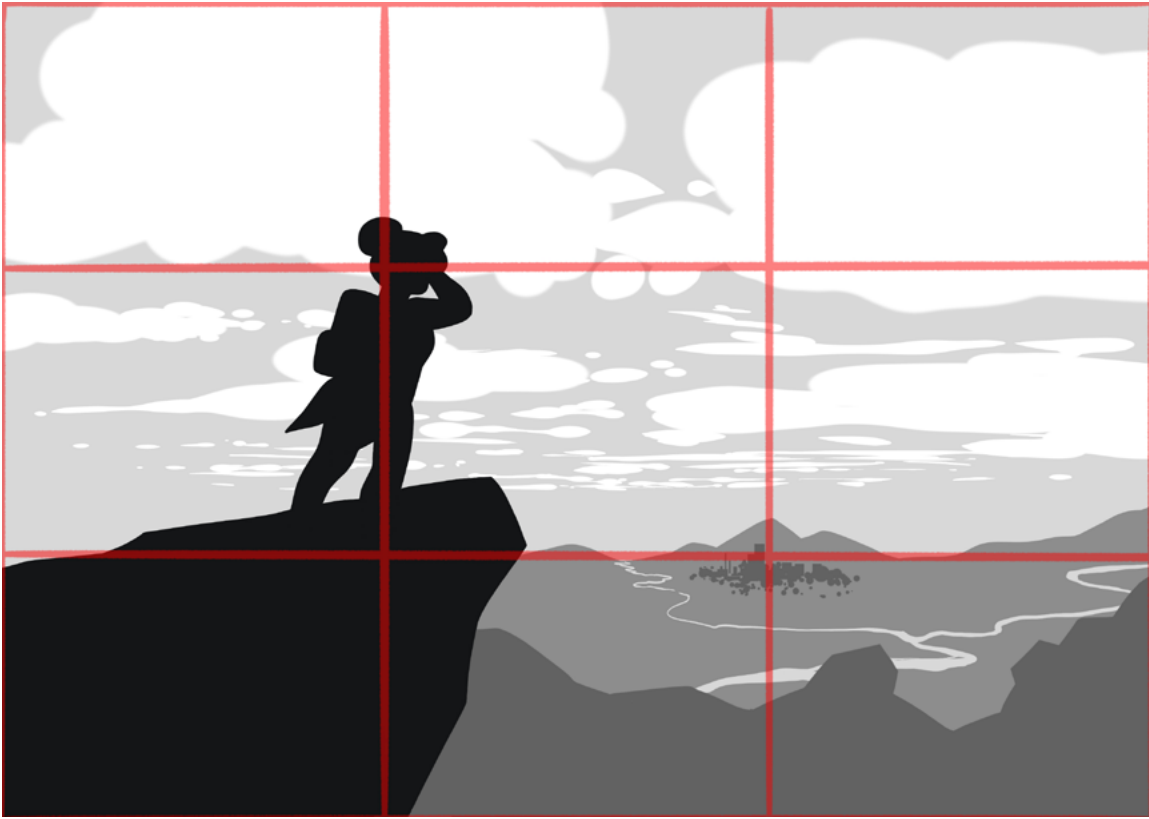
Above is an incredibly simple use of the rule of thirds. You can see the way the horizon line rests at that bottom third, how the character in front follows the left vertical, and how the head, which is the focal point, intersects that point. The distant city sits at the focal point diagonal from the main area of focus. When placing a secondary focal point, it's often thought best to put it diagonally rather than next to or above/below, as putting two focal points on the same line reinforces the underlying grid of the composition where the diagonal serves to break it. It also creates a better sense of balance than stacking focal elements towards one side of the composition does.

And on the subject of diagonals, there's still quite a lot you can do within the rule of thirds that doesn't involve sticking solely to strict verticals and horizontals.

As established, the main focal point is the person sitting with the large hat. On the right hand side, the people and rock formations fill up enough of that third of the canvas that the slight diagonal isn't too distracting. In the top third, the two birds and the umbrella create a sort of false horizontal feeling there with an implied line, which parallels the angle of the beach. The ocean water actually is on a strict horizontal, which helps contextualize the diagonals.
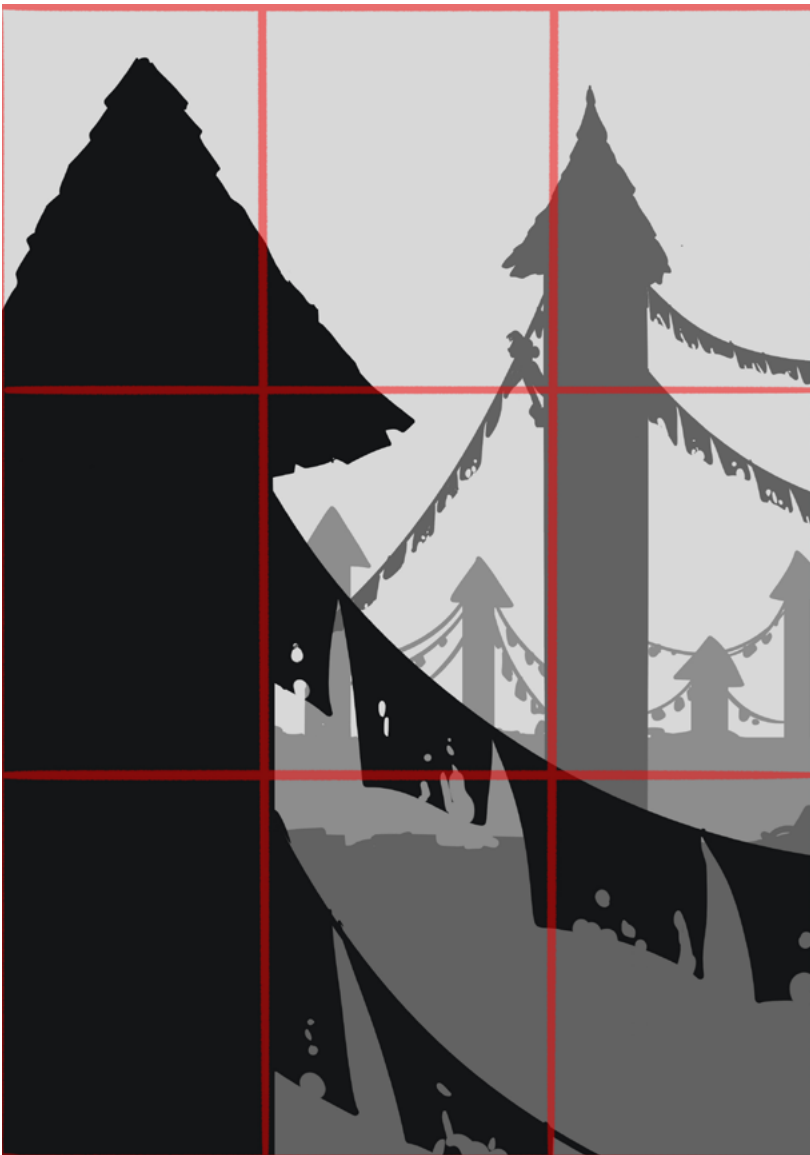
The foreground tower aligns with the left third of the image. The figure in the middle ground tower originates from the top right intersection point. You'll notice specifically here that neither the foreground nor the background lines up with the bottom horizontal third, and instead it splits the difference. This is just because I tried variations of this composition where either the middle ground or foreground hit that line, and neither of them looked as appealing. This isn't dogma; feel free to branch out from it when it's not serving you.

These compositions were all actively designed to take advantage of the rule of thirds, but eventually at some point you'll start to subconsciously internalize these proportions. Once that happens, you'll rarely feel inclined to layer a grid on top of things, but the option is always available to help you course-correct your drawings.

Next we'll take a look at a drawing that wasn't done with the rule of thirds kept in mind at all. The following image was drawn with a photo reference; I'll be showing them side by side, with and without the rule of thirds grid on top.

[Photo credit: philipp__hofstetter on instagram]
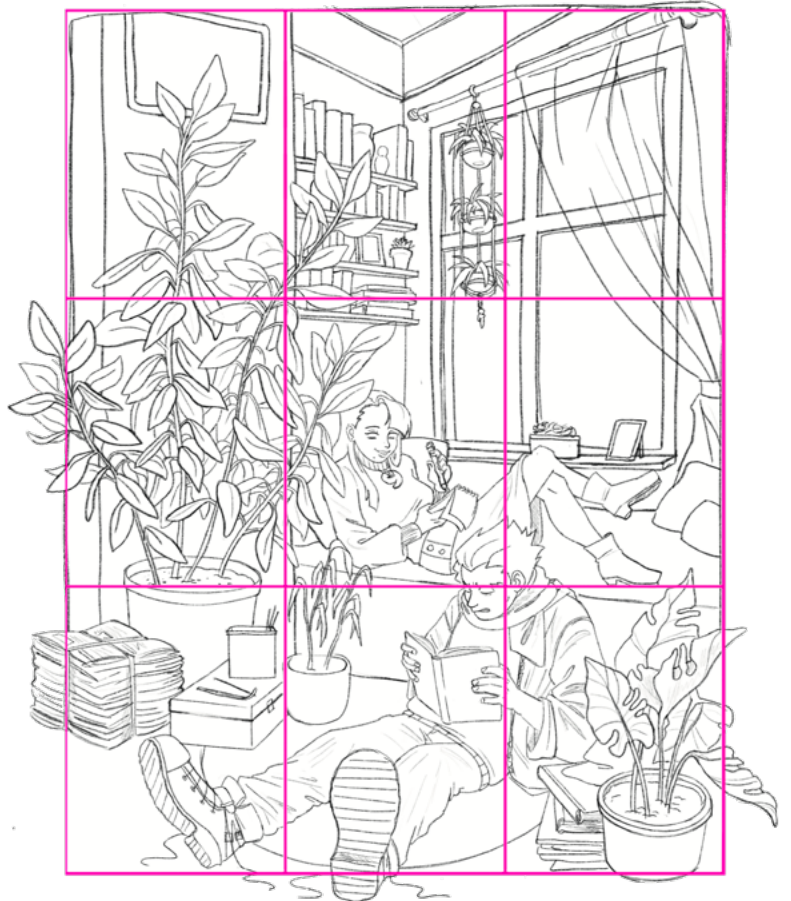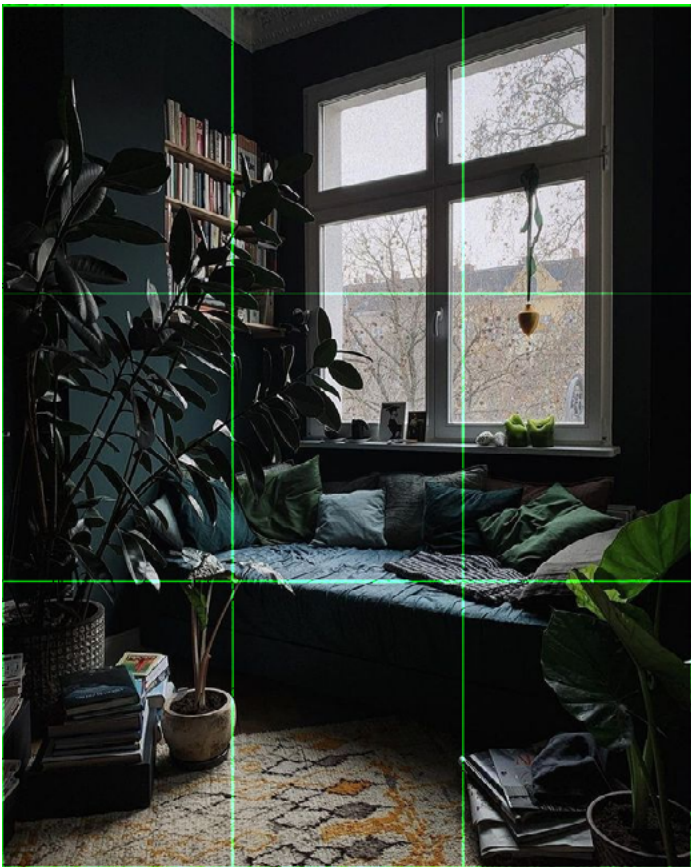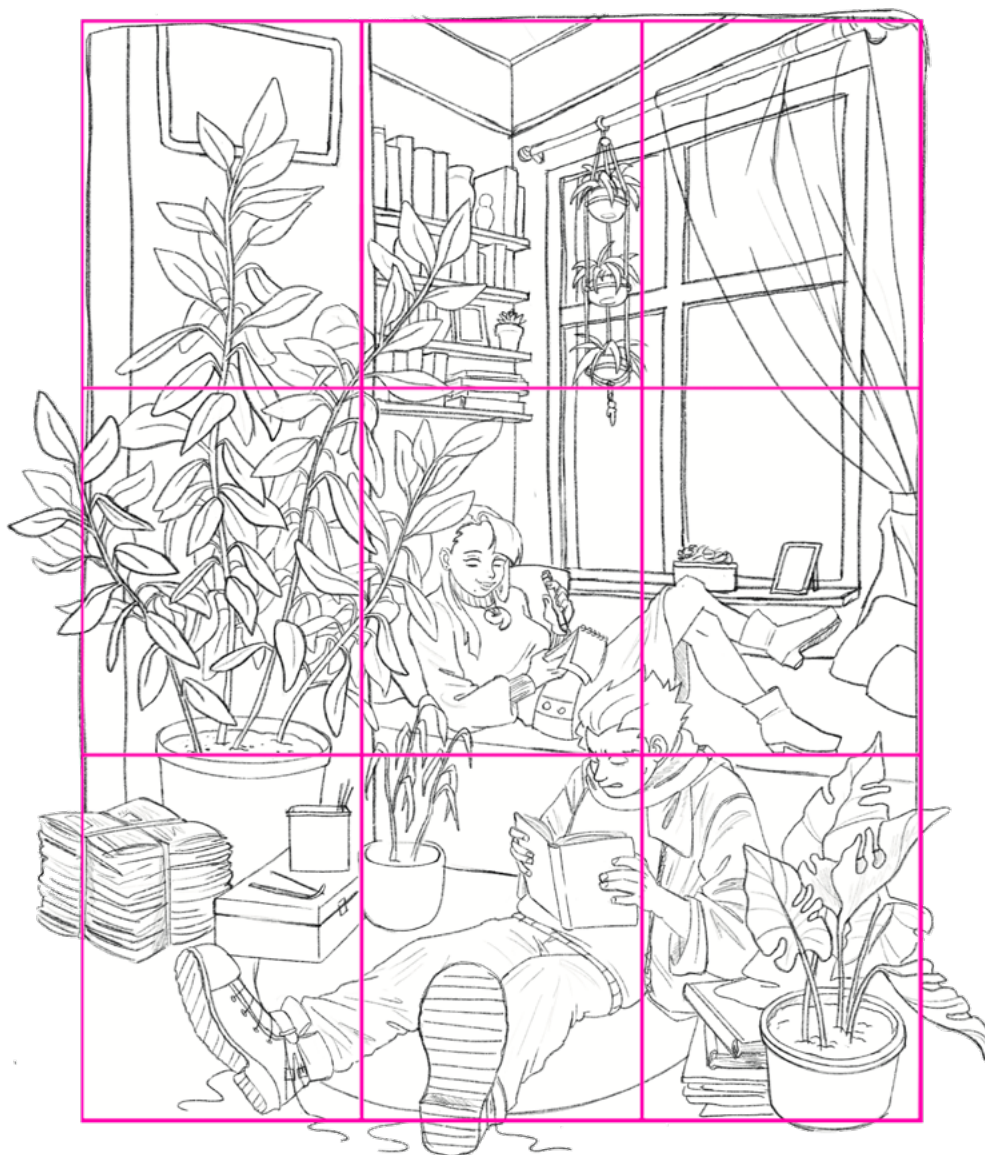
You can see that in my drawing, I vastly exaggerated the portion of wall sticking out on the left hand side, causing it to align almost perfectly with the veritcal dividing line. When placing the figures, I place the foreground figure in a location where his head is right on the bottom right focal point. This was all completely unintentional, or rather, instinctual. The daybed also aligns a bit more closely with the bottom horizontal divide in my interpretation of the scene. Once you develop a sense for the kind of proportion you find visually pleasing, it'll be harder to not use it.

The rule of thirds is very simple and flexible, so I'm not going to bother examining any additional examples beyond my own work. If you're interested in seeing more, a quick search will find you a plethora of examples.

contrast

I'll be keeping this section extremely brief, but it's an idea that's import-
ant to introduce early. We'll be covering how to control your contrast later
on. The thing to know from the get-go is that the area of a drawing that
immediately draws the eye will be the area where there is the most pro-
nounced contrast. And I don't necessarily mean just contrast in terms of
value – dark areas vs light areas – but rather, any sort of visual contrast.
Things that stick out from their surroundings catch the brain's attention
faster than we have a chance to consciously process it. If we compare
it to another form of sensory input, if you're running your hands along a
smooth banister you probably won't be thinking about it much until you
come upon some nicks or dents that you catch on. Or if you're digging
through rough sand on the beach, you might only stop and pay attention
to what you're doing when you hit a smooth shell that's buried there.

Contrast is difficult to see at times, so it helps to look at an image small
or from a distance to notice which part stands out the most in a given
piece's big read. Take a look at the following thumbnails and make note
of which areas immediately draw your focus.

my drawings
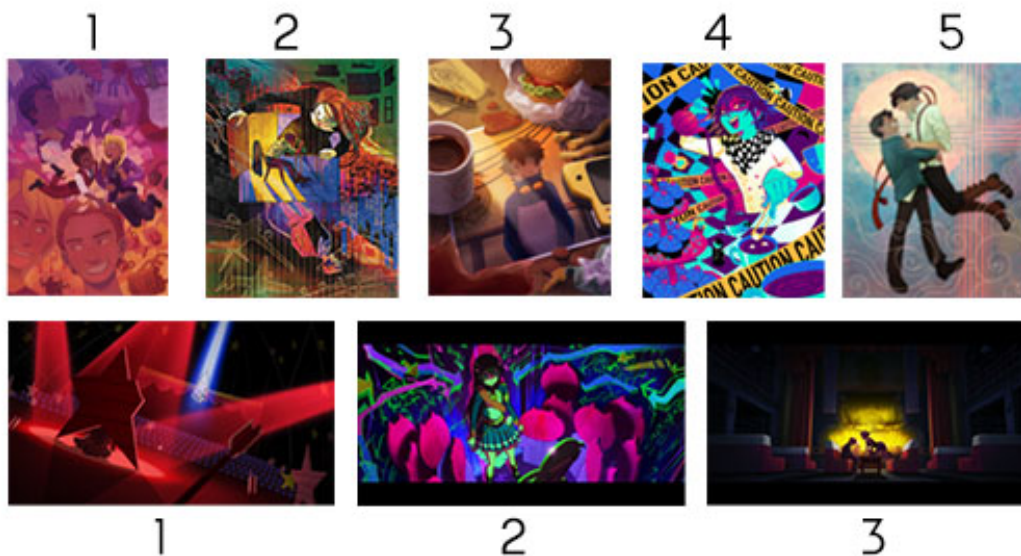
Shoujo Kageki Revue
Starlight stills

my drawings

1   2   3   4   5
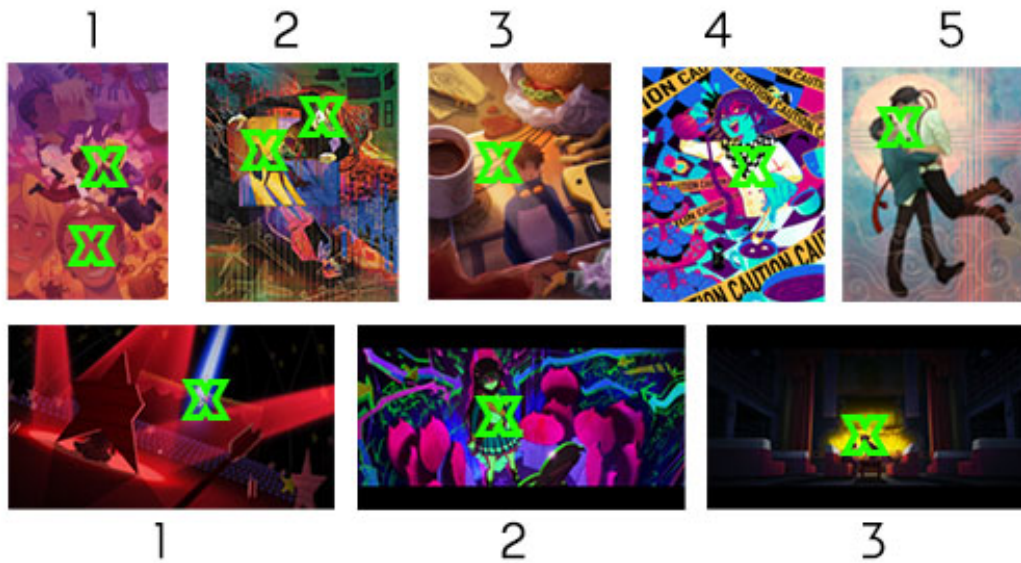
Shoujo Kageki Revue
Starlight stills

I've marked with a green X the place where your focus is most likely to land on these thumbnails. Now I'll go through and talk about the contrast that's happening in each of these examples.

In the Revue Starlight stills:

1. From episode 1 of the anime. The foreground is overwhelming and dramatic but focus is easily brought to the middle ground with the strip of blue light.
2. From the Revue Starlight movie. Everything in this shot is lit similarly with an eerie glow but the green lighting on the central figure immediately sticks out from the pink lighting on everything else
3. From the Revue Starlight movie. The only light in this scene is coming from that central point which provides heavy contrast right behind the two figures.

In my drawings:

1. In this image the background elements are much more monochromatic and lower contrast than the foreground elements. The most variety in color and value is in the middle with those two figures. However, humans are really instinctively drawn towards faces. At this scale, the large face on the bottom is still visible so it might have brought your attention downwards. At a large scale, all of the faces will be visible, so that one on the bottom will have less relative weight and won't distract as much from the center
2. The big yellow rectangle is very prominent amidst all the clutter and darker colors, but so is the white face against the black shirt in the upper right. Either of these could easily pull the focus first, which is something I'm fine with for this particular piece.
3. Once again we're drawn towards faces, and the hot spot of light right next to the face makes that a point of value contrast as well.
4. There are a ton of smaller, more complicated shapes everywhere else in this drawing, so the largest and simplest shape stands out. It's also lighter than everything else around it.
5. The big yellow circle here is used to contrast the backgrounds blue, and then once you're drawn to that circle the only thing inside of it to look at is the two heads.

Doing color thumbnails or at least value thumbnails before you start finalizing a drawing can be helpful for noticing stuff like this, but even if you want to skip the thumbnail phase, learning to look back at your drawings holistically and to notice points of contrast is going to help you a lot going forward.

flow

Another primary concern of composition is controlling the way the eye is inclined to travel through an image. Upon seeing an image, the viewer will first be struck by the overall big read of the piece, and if they should then feel the urge to look closer they'll begin to examine the image in more detail. Whatever visual element is the most immediately prominent will most likely be what people look at first. From there, people will sub-consciously take cues from the elements within the composition to deter-mine where they should be looking next. These visual cues are the flow.

People don't tend to just jump around looking at things randomly and in-stead will follow whatever path feels 'natural'. This is also important be-cause the overall sense of motion in a piece contributes greatly to what the initial vibe will be. Two pieces handling similar subject matter with different flow can give a distinctly different impression to audiences. Your job as the artist is to make sure you are handling your piece's flow with active intent.

So, how do you do that? The TL;DR is: add in stuff that points to the stuff you want people to look at. It's that simple! Minutes to learn, a lifetime to master. Sort of. This is where intentional use of shape and line really starts to come into play.

Essentially, more shape-oriented areas or areas where there's a sudden interruption to the sense of flow are going to be the places that peo-ple stop and look at. More linear areas are oftentimes more transitional, and people will spend less time dwelling on them, but use these areas to guide them towards the areas where they will dwell.

I'm first going to show you a visual explanation of flow, and then quick examples of two versatile principles you can use to help control your flow with precision and intent: gesture and implied line.
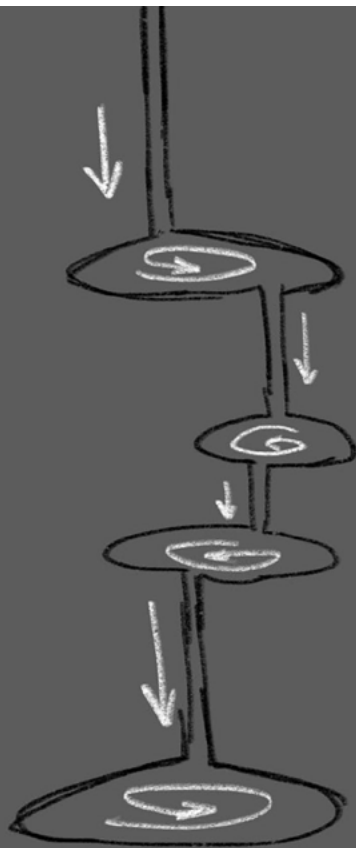
Try thinking of a composition as flowing like water. Linear areas are like streams of water, and then larger shape areas are where that water pools and lingers.

The eye will travel between major compositional elements by following whatever linear elements are linking them together.

Flow is fastest in open, straight areas

...but flow slows down as the intended path becomes twistier or more complex

Flow gets even slower when the intended path has a bunch of stuff in the way. It can get broken down into several smaller 'streams' before merging back together.
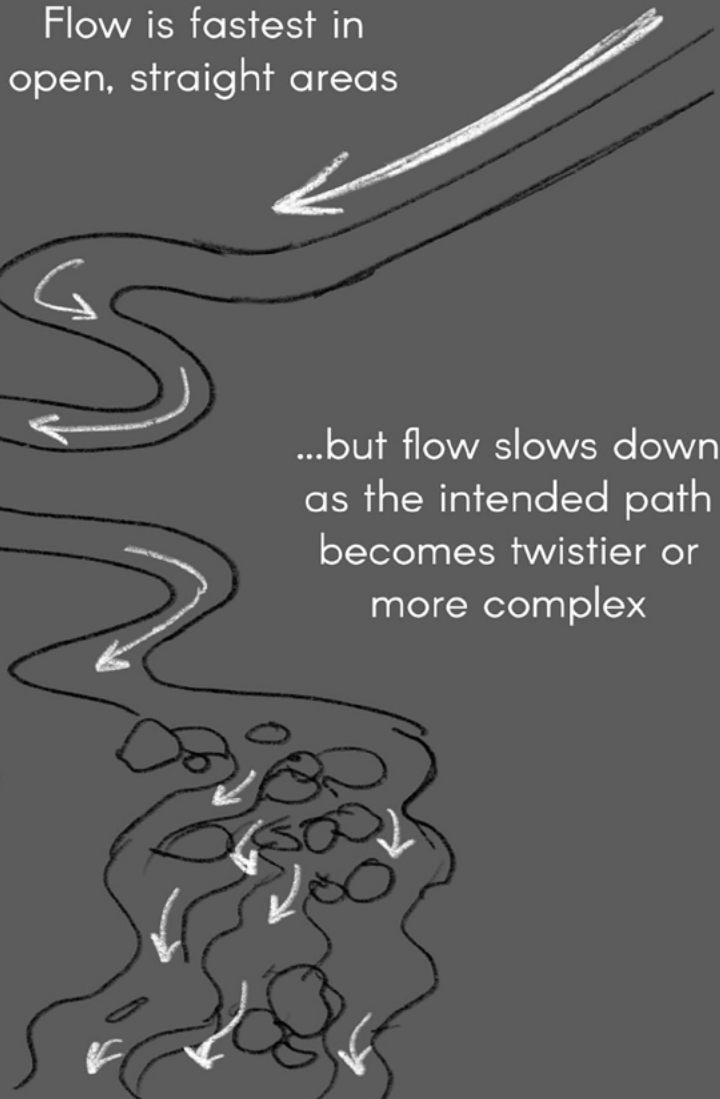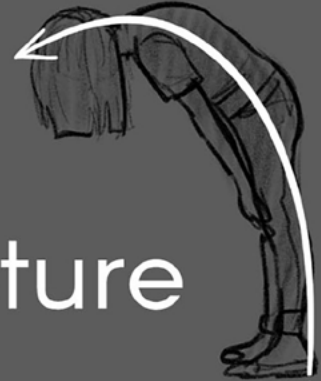
Gesture

When we think of gesture in art, probably the first thing that comes to mind is figure drawing, but I think its super helpful to keep in mind the gestural quality that's present in all organic shapes. Essentially, the overall motion of an object's pose creates a sense of direction that you can use to guide the eye in your compositions.

Multiple objects can have a relationship with each other that provides a distinct path for the eye to follow. These are known as implied lines and are extremely useful in directing compositional flow. Never underestimate the human brain's desire to conect dots.
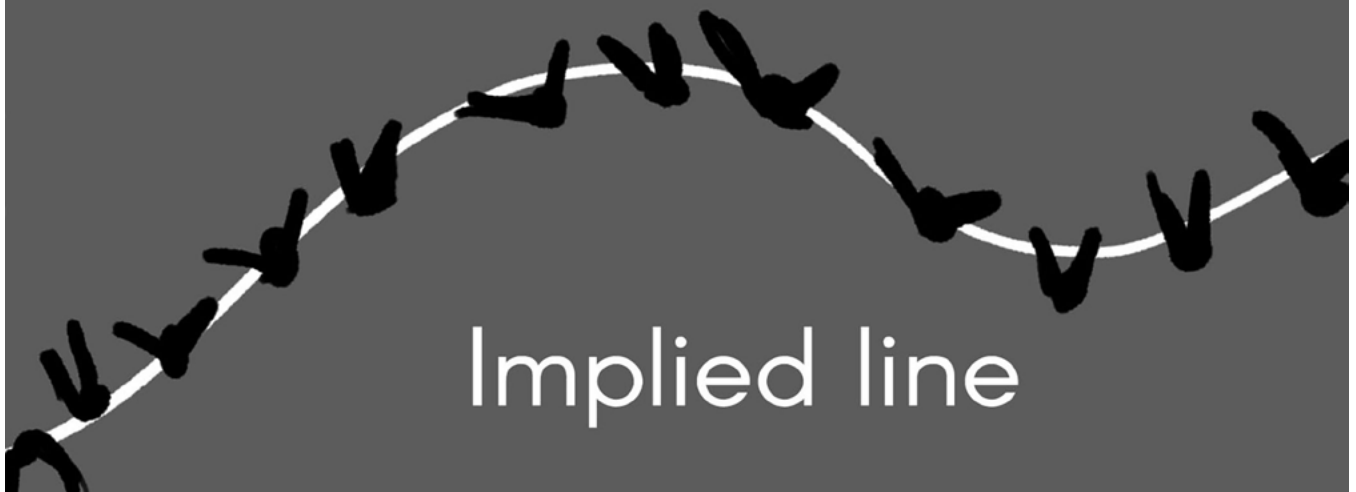
Implied line

Time to examine these ideas look like in practice. We're going to start with a very simple example, then I'll move on to unpacking some of my own compositional choices, and after that we'll compare two pieces that share the same concept with different executions.

We'll return to Shoujo Kageki Revue Starlight, my personal favorite anime of all time. Its compositions are top of the line. They tend to err towards being boldly graphic and highly effective even at just a quick glance, as we saw earlier. Take a look at the following screenshot and try and build your own conception of the image's flow. On the following page, I'll do my own analysis.

a screenshot from episode 8

What immediately catches the eye here is the massive hand. It creates an arc that points down towards the figure in the bottom left

The foreground elements on the right are large than the ones on the left, and overlap with the hand, making them prominent.

The gesture of the figure on the right leads down across the floor plane towards the figure on the left. The two swords point directly at each other making an implied line

The figure on the left is distinct once you look, but at first glance mimics the other shapes in the foreground, which de-emphasizes it until the rest of the composition leads you there.

One of my drawings, done for a zine. Once again, I invite you to think about the flow yourself before moving on to my analysis.

The piano keys and guitar intersect the rake lines, creating a sort of frame on the image's top half that leads into the main focal area.

The explosion/starburst of the paper creats a sense of motion that originates from a focal point

The gesture of the figures also creates a sense of motion that leads up into the focal area from the botom half.

The place you're probably inclined to look at in that drawing is the central figures floating in front of the paper. Part of that is because that's the area with the most immediate contrast, as we touched on earlier. We'll be looking at controlling contrast in it's own section later on, so I'm going to avoid talking about it for the sake of these analyses and focus on the shape-based elements instead. The explosion of papers is doing double duty as a compositional element in this piece. It acts as both a static backdrop to frame the figures, and implies motion that originates from a focal point which leads you back into its center. The pieces of paper trailing out on either side make an implied line that leads back into the middle, but I have un-implied that line by just drawing normal, non-implied rake lines on top of it for emphasis.

It's a lot more of a free-for-all in the bottom half of the image. Obviously the big thing that's gonna catch someone's eye down there is the headshots, but other than that the miscellaneous objects surrounding them don't have much of a sense of flow or order to them. They're really not supposed to, either. They're just there hanging out to be looked at as much or as little as anyone feels personally inclined to.
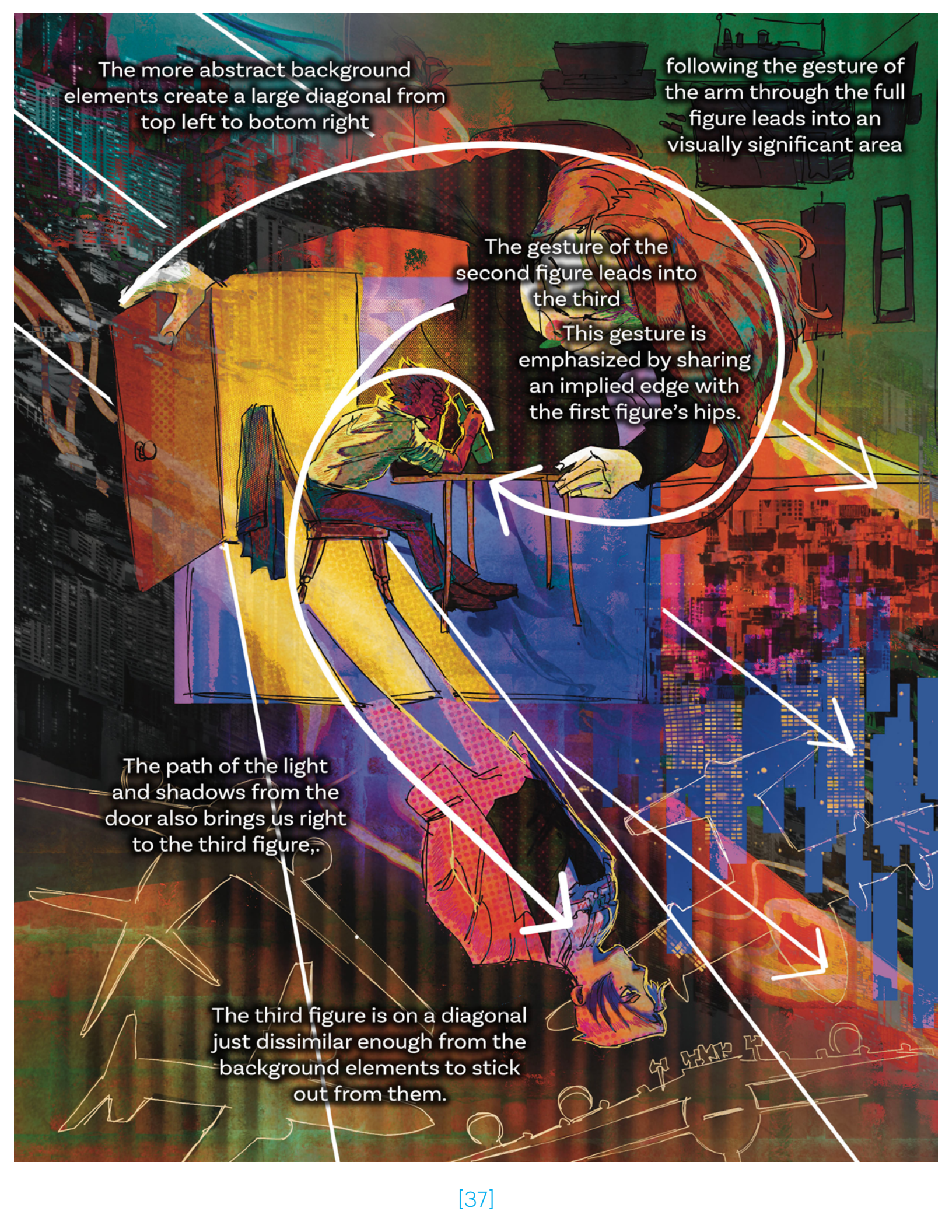
Now for another one of my drawings.

The more abstract background elements create a large diagonal from top left to botom right

following the gesture of the arm through the full figure leads into an visually significant area

The gesture of the second figure leads into the third

This gesture is emphasized by sharing an implied edge with the first figure's hips.

The path of the light and shadows from the door also brings us right to the third figure,.

The third figure is on a diagonal just dissimilar enough from the background elements to stick out from them.

This piece is a little bit of an odder one, I was really just sort of throwing spaghetti at the wall to see what would stick. There's a lot of visual noise in this image that, by design, makes it kind of hard to look at. The background elements have a disproportionate amount of detail when compared to the figures, but it's not really detail that encourages closer inspection, so it doesn't distract too much from the actual subject matter of the piece.

The piece is more abstracted than the last one, but it's more structured as well. These visual elements relate to each other more actively than the ones in the last piece. It's something resembling a scene rather than disparate visuals, which significantly helps in leading the eye.

Finally we're gonna compare different executions of the same subject.

Caravaggio, Judith Beheading Holofernes (c. 1598–99 or 1602)
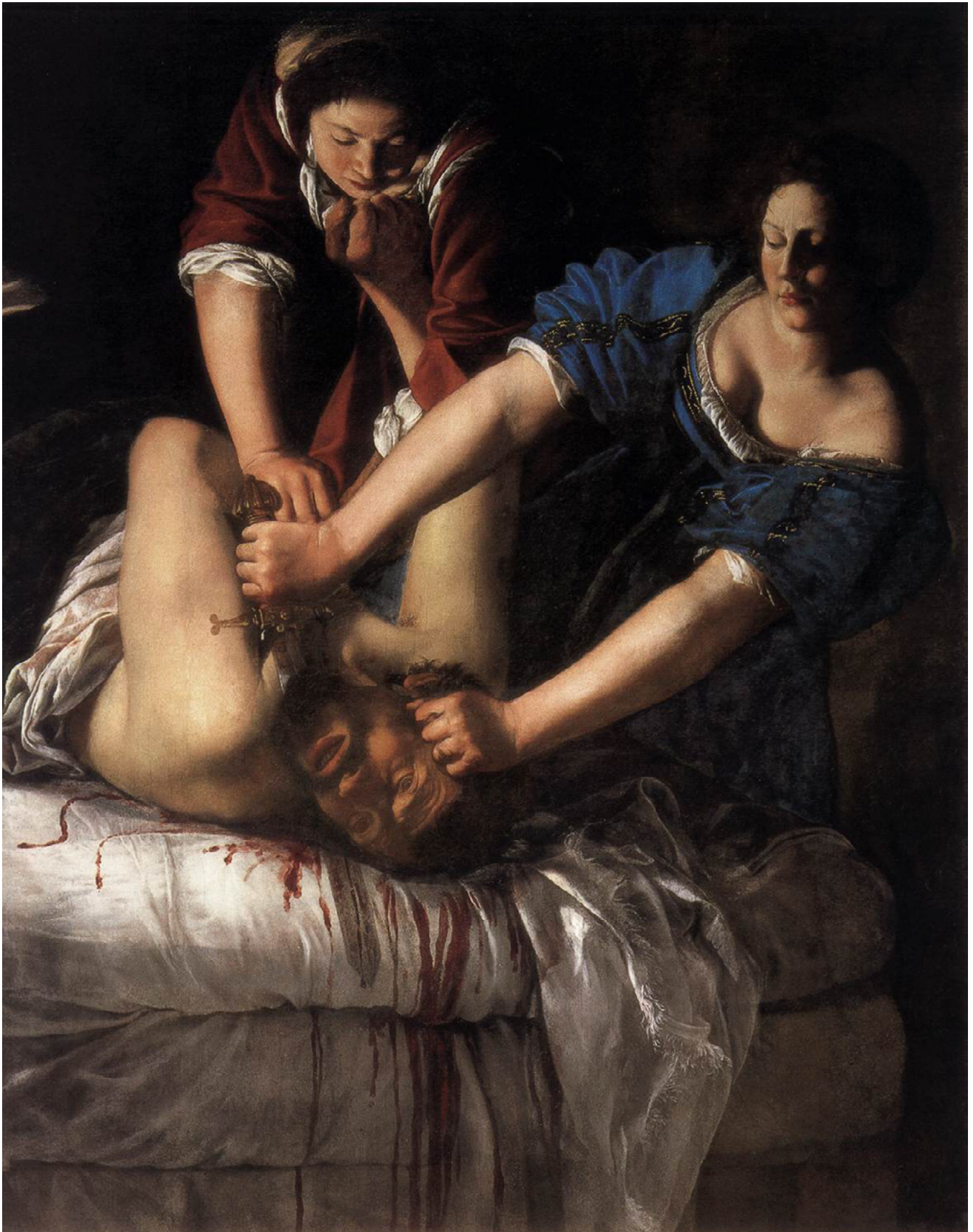
Artemisia Gentileschi, Judith Slaying Holofernes (c. 1612–1613)

Both paintings depict the same narrative. Gentileschi herself was a Car-rivagisti – one of the baroque painters who picked up Caravaggio's style after his work became popular. Essentially, these drawings are as related as two works can be while still being produced by different artists. Despite that, these two works have incredibly different vibes to them, which makes them perfect to analyze here. Caravaggio's is far more relaxed and balanced whereas Gentileschi's feels forceful and active. Let's take a look at how each piece flows.

the most prominent linear elements of this composition make a sort of starburst that originates from the main action.

The figures on the right are fairly vertical, not having a prominent gesture. This makes them feel very separate from the much more lively fellow being murdered on the left.

TThe flow between the two halves of this composition takes the form of this big, loose S curve, shown in green.

This creates a relaxed and elegant feeling visually despite what's actually being depicted.

It may seem like I'm a bit overly focused on body language here, but when the vast majority of your piece is taken up by its figures the body language dictates the composition. Even on smaller scales, body language is a compositional element. Just due to how heavily the human brain is inclined to prioritize anthropomorphic shapes, figures have a disproportionate amount of power over an image. The largest bit of flow in this piece is the overall horizontal. There's comparatively little vertical energy, and what vertical energy does exist is pretty well balanced, meaning it more or less cancels itself out. On top of that, even though the horizontal is very prominent, it doesn't feel very active.

The posing of the figures makes this scene feel staged and stiff. This is clearly by design, as Caravaggio was beyond capable of depicting energetic figures in his work, but there's still the subjective question of whether or not it is effective. For better or worse, the violence of this scene is muted by the lack of any visual tension to emphasize the narrative tension of the murder itself.

Gentileschi's piece, which I'll show on the next page, has significant motion. Everything converges down towards Holofernes' head. Then, critically, this motion is abruptly stopped. Returning to the metaphor of flow as water, it helps to think of the mattress as a dam someone put up to block the image's flow. The dripping blood and sheet are the bit of flow that's allowed to escape through this dam. The fact that all of the downward motion has this horizontal to press against is what makes it feel so intense. It's that bit of contrast in the composition that differs from Caravaggio's easygoing curves.

Which one is 'better' is a matter of personal preference, but it's undeniable that they're curating two different feelings and the main thing responsible for that difference is the compositional choices.
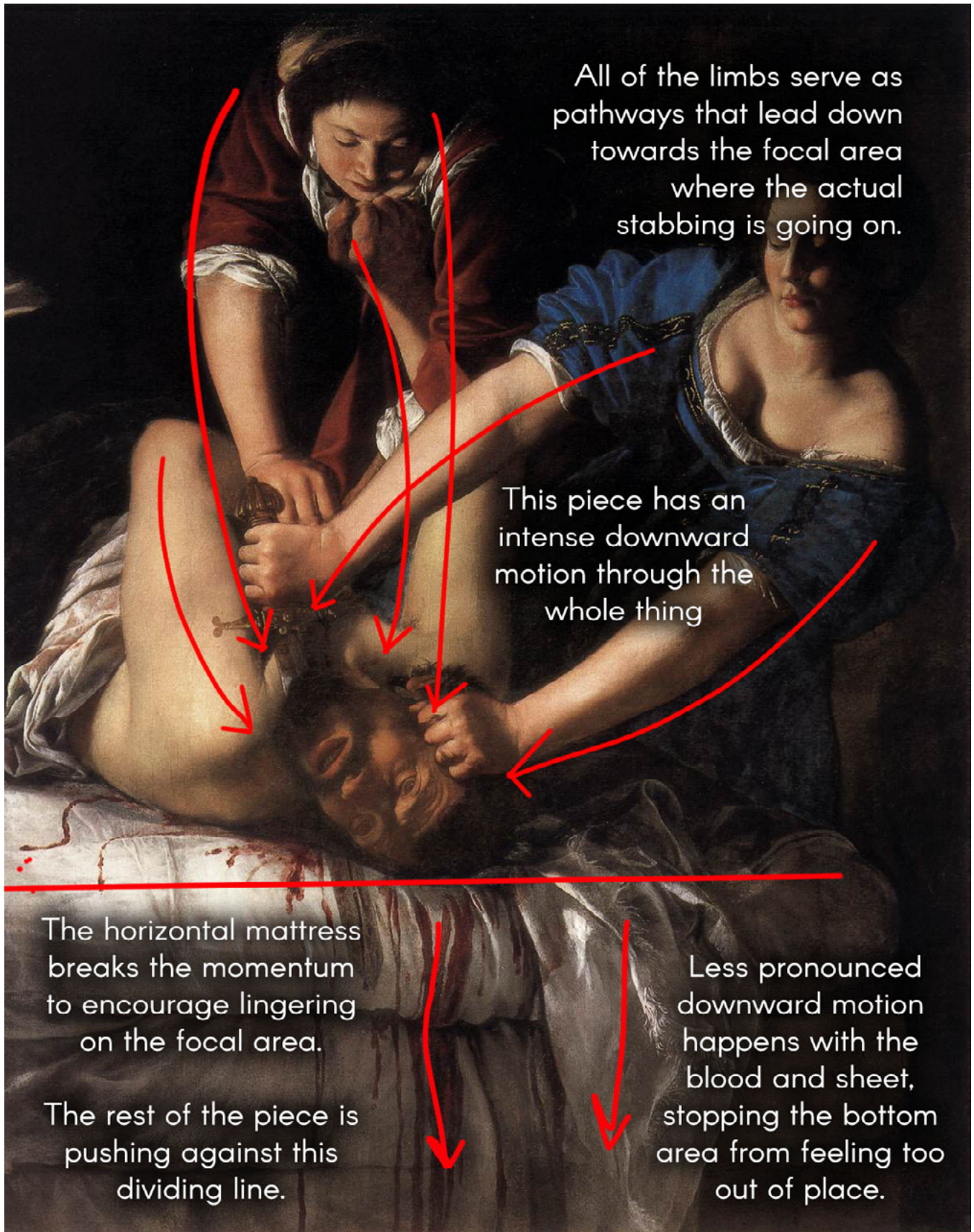
All of the limbs serve as pathways that lead down towards the focal area where the actual stabbing is going on.

This piece has an intense downward motion through the whole thing

The horizontal mattress breaks the momentum to encourage lingering on the focal area.

The rest of the piece is pushing against this dividing line.

Less pronounced downward motion happens with the blood and sheet, stopping the bottom area from feeling too out of place.

III. SHAPE LANGUAGE

positive and negative space revisited

Before we get too into it with shape I just want to really quickly revisit our concept of positive and negative space from earlier. We're gonna just add another layer of complexity here. We looked at negative space and positive space as a binary before, which involved making some decisions about how we conceptualize the visuals. Now I'm going to ask you to think of positive and negative space in terms of slices. This is essential- ly just a pretty basic combination of the idea of positive/negative space and the idea of background/middleground/foreground. We'll look back at some of the same Utena screencaps.

Foreground blue, middleground red, background yellow. Negative space is represented by the light green lines. We're focusing on smaller sections this time, so I haven't marked of all of the negative space. This is the 'true' negative space in this section of the image. By contrast, let's think of this next one as the 'framing' negative space – the negative space within a given slice of depth, usually the foreground.

We understand that the figure in the background isn't sharing the same physical space with the figure in the foreground, which allows us to conceptualize the space between the arms and torso as 'negative space' even though there's visual interest there. Whereas the shape of the 'true' negative space is pretty nonsensical, there's a bit more rhyme and reason to the framing space. It's primarily triangular, with a little bit of an arrow shape to it.

Look at the rest of the negative space in this shot in yellow; it's all composed of vaguely triangular segments too. The repetition in these shapes – the piece's rhythm, a concept we'll cover later in this section – is part of what makes this composition so pleasing and you can really only understand it when you think about it in terms of these slices of space.
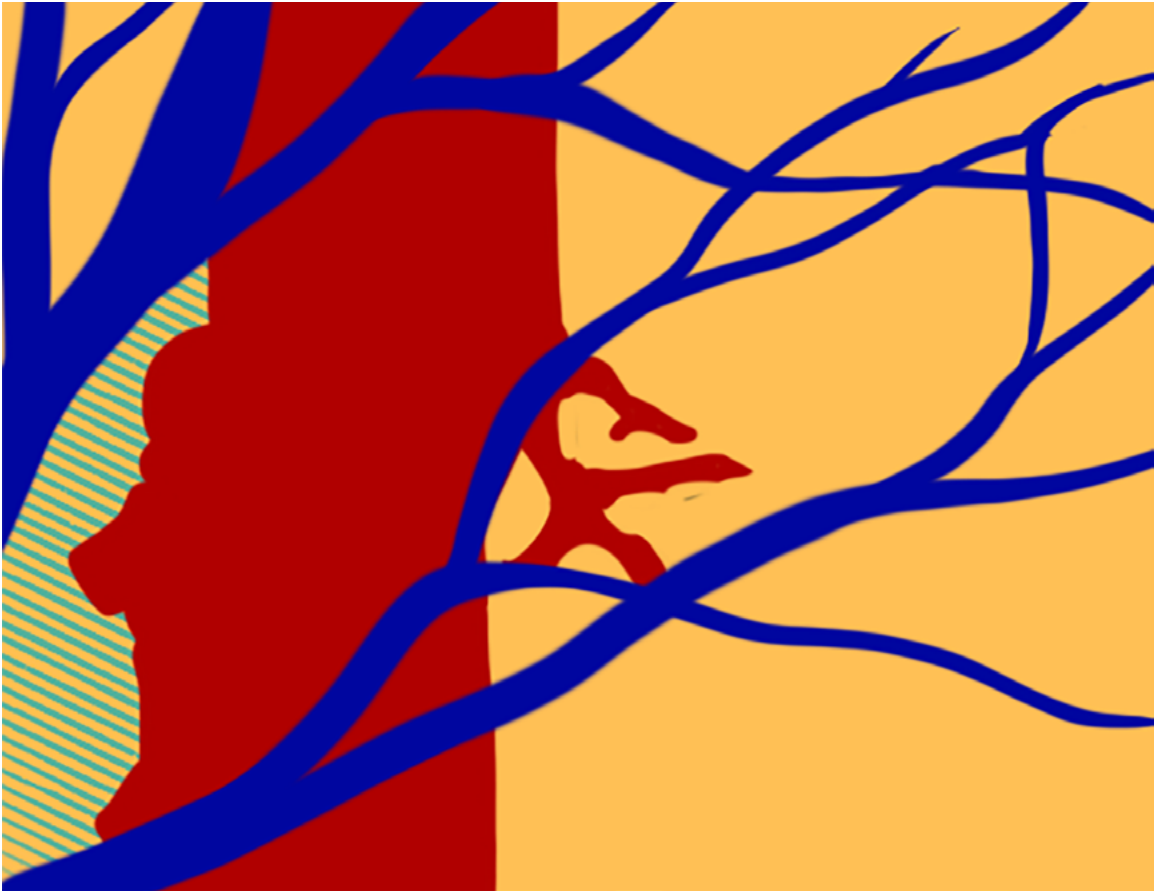
Again, the true negative space and the framing space respectively. The true negative space isn't much of anything, but the framing space is this wonky elongated diamond-ish shape, which we see repeated in the space between other branches alongside some triangular segments.
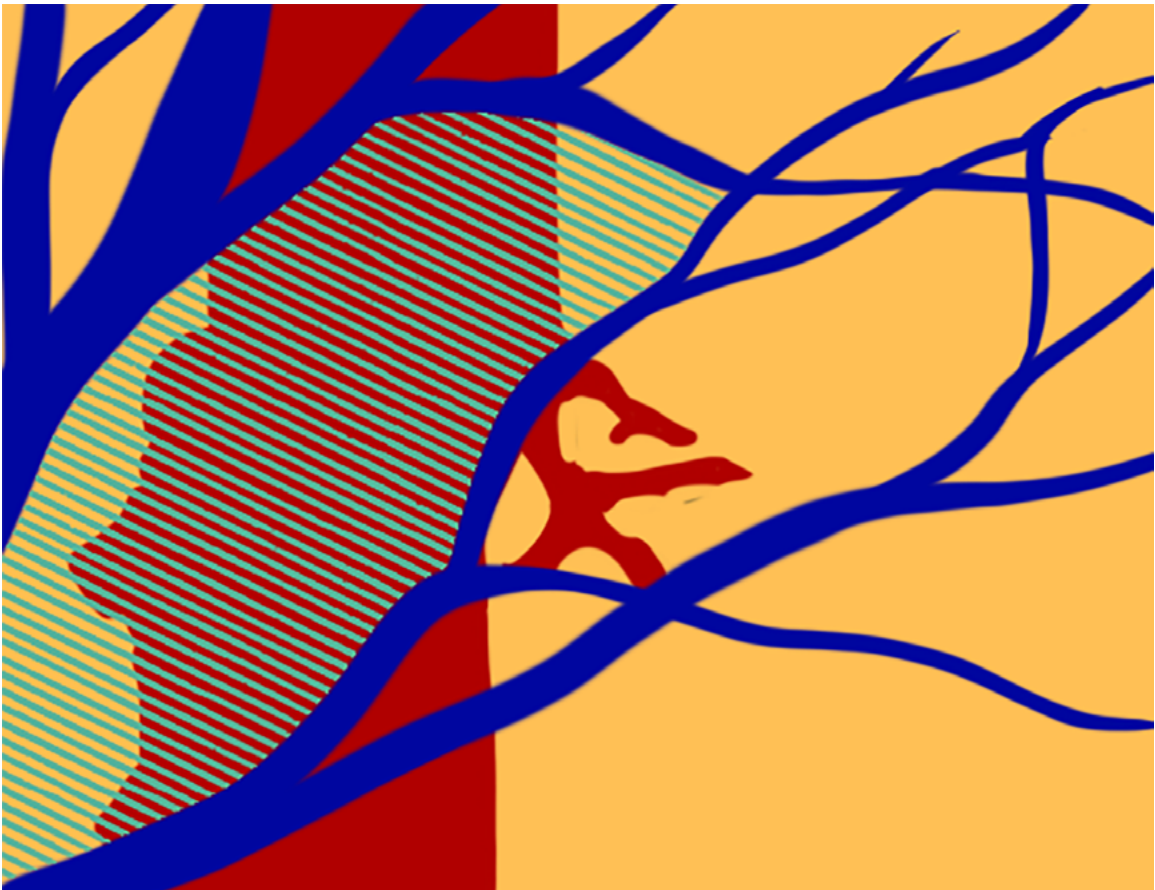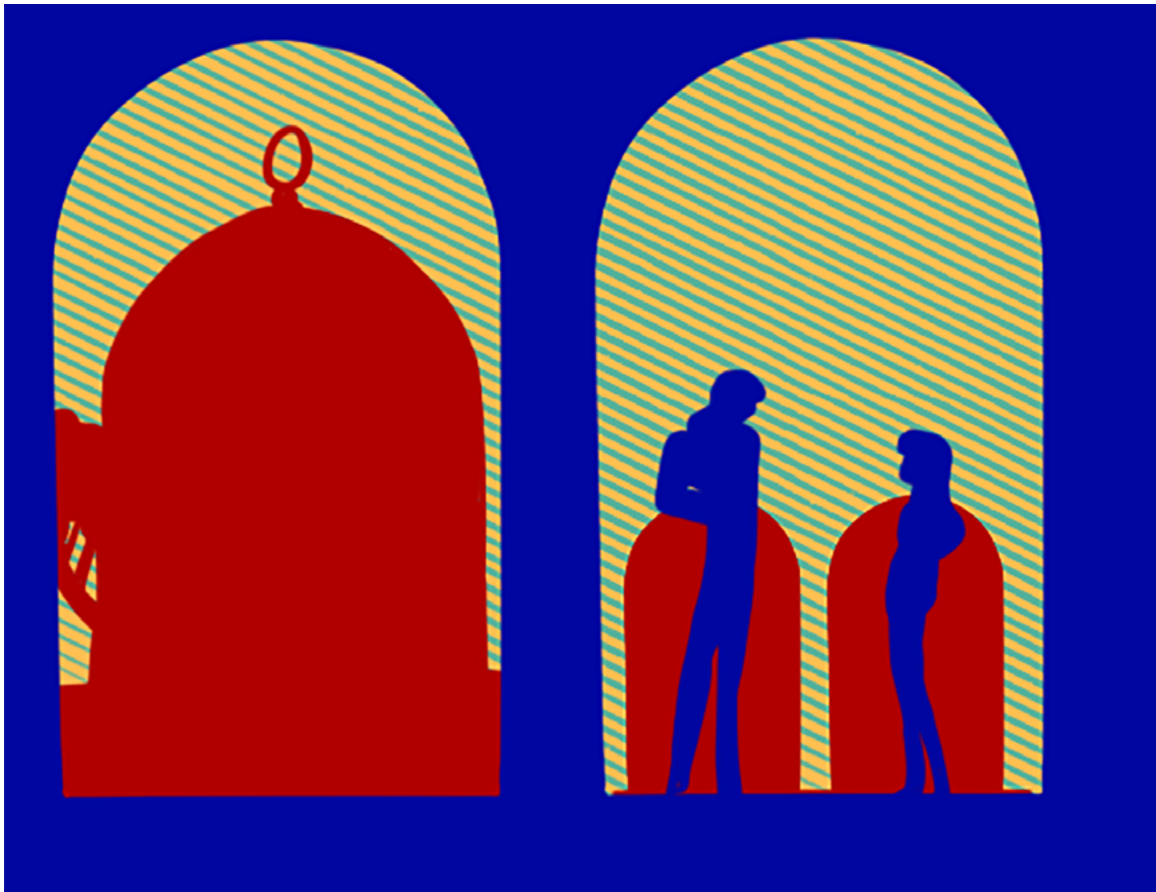
Last set. The negative space is these big archways that mimic the birdcage shape of the greenhouse.
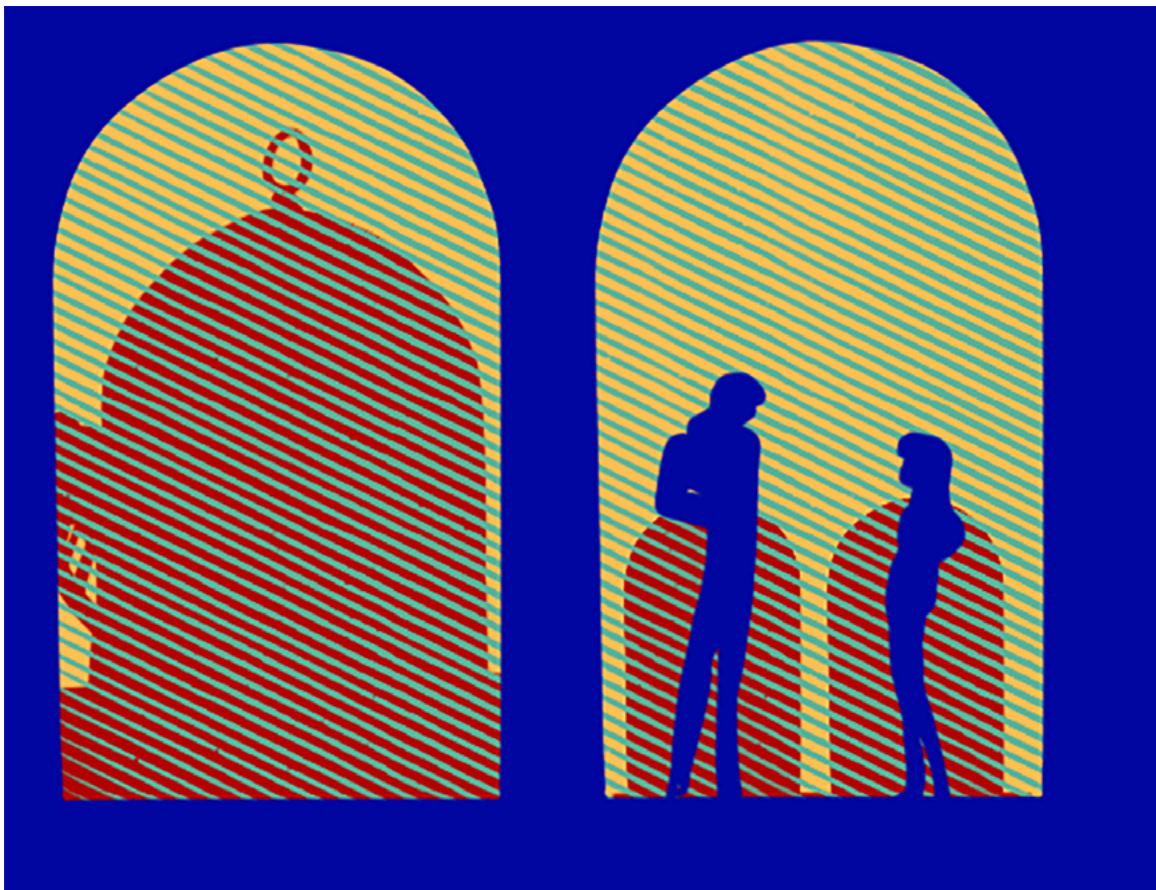
Understanding the implied, invisible shapes that exist in your drawing because of its negative space is critical to understanding the overall impact of the shape language in your piece.

There are also tons of ways to make the relationship between positive and negative space ambiguous, or to otherwise play around with the concept.

Here's a couple of Magritte paintings that take advantage of an irregular relationship between positive and negative space to great success.

Rene Magritte, The Muscles of the Sky (c. 1927)

There's something about this one I really love. I don't even know why, I just find it delightful. I suppose that it might seem gloomy or creepy, but that's never how it's felt to me. I just think this is a fun painting.

Rene Magritte, The Blank Signature (c. 1965)

AKA 'the painting that's on that one Styx album'

Here are a few contemporary works of collage by artist [Alessandro Gioiello.](#)
In the case of collage, the concept of 'negative space' becomes very liter-
al because there are parts that are being physically cut away. Despite that
(or arguably because of that), the relationship between positive and negative
space in these works is almost completely arbitrary. It's beautiful work.

This one in particular I'm really fond of. Much of the bridge and the space surrounding it are both made up of sky, which has the awesome effect of creating something that reads as a positive out of two negatives.

When all is said and done, positive and negative space is just a way of understanding the large silhouettes of your drawing. Controlling this space allows you to dictate the amount of immediate clarity your piece will have in its big read. Sometimes you want a lot of clarity, sometimes you don't. As always, the important thing is for this to be an active decision you're making in your art.

hierarchy of shape

Similar to flow, shape hierarchy is a very large and abstract concept. This will probably be the most difficult thing to explain in this guide. What I offer you in this section isn't any sort of technique; I'm just going to ask you to think about an image in a way you might not be used to thinking about it. Essentially, hierarchy of shape is about priority in compositional elements, and understanding the level of abstraction in the geometry and space of your drawing. There may be an academic term for this concept that I'm not aware of, but this is how I think of it. Considering your shape hierarchy is a rather active and involved exercise in conceptualization. Let's start by talking about shape relations. There's really no end to the relationship that shapes can have with each other in an image.

For example, they can be...

larger or smaller in scale

in front of or behind each other

contained in each other
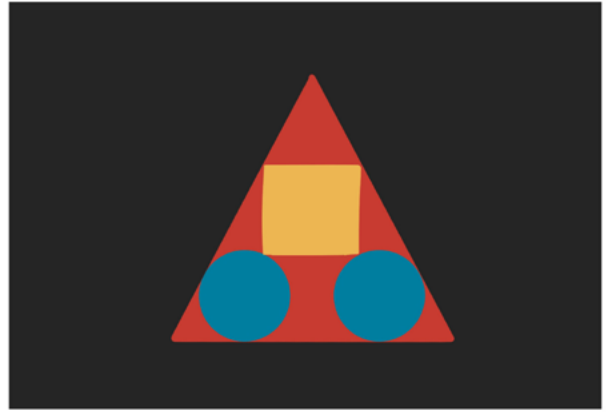
implied by each other
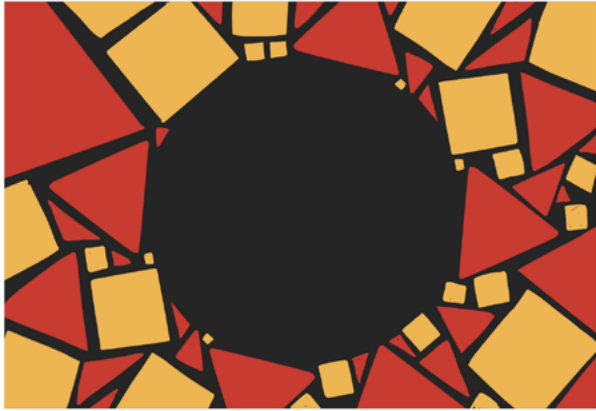
patterned

scattered
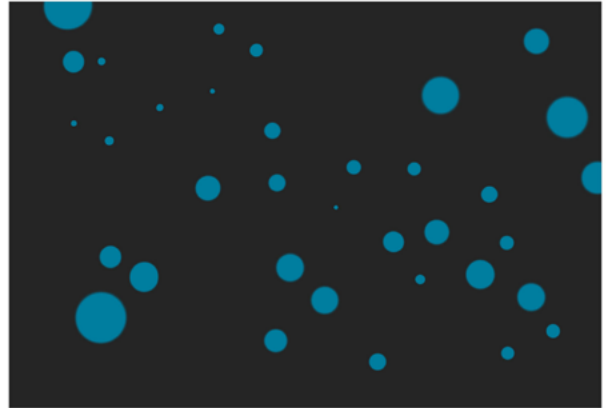
nested
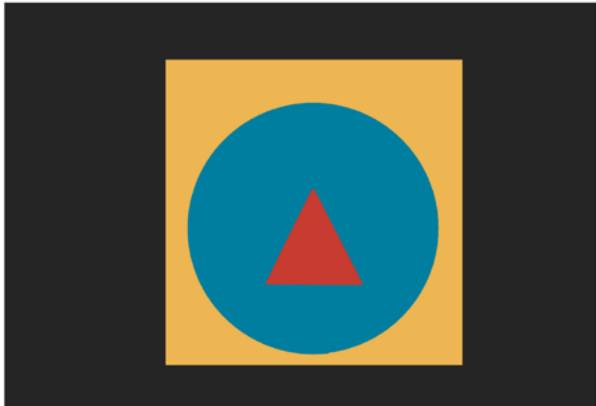
contextualized

...and much much more.

Every drawing is going to have a variety of shapes that relate to each other in a variety of different ways. These relationships can be visual, physical, contextual, or some combination of the three.

A visual relationship would be any relationship where shapes affect each other's visual impact without providing any additional information or understanding of the piece.

Adding the circle background to a 3/4ths bust (tried and true classic. Old reliable.) adds visual interest, but provides no additional meaning or spatial interaction.

(self portrait of me catching my roommates escaped chickens.)

A contextual relationship is a relationship where shapes enhance each other's meaning – the presence of one shape allows you to understand the purpose of the other more.

What are these checker pattern segments meant to invoke? Adding additional visuals contextualizes and clarifies.

identical shapes convey two different meanings when you change the shapes they relate to.

Chessboard!

Finish line! Checkered flag!
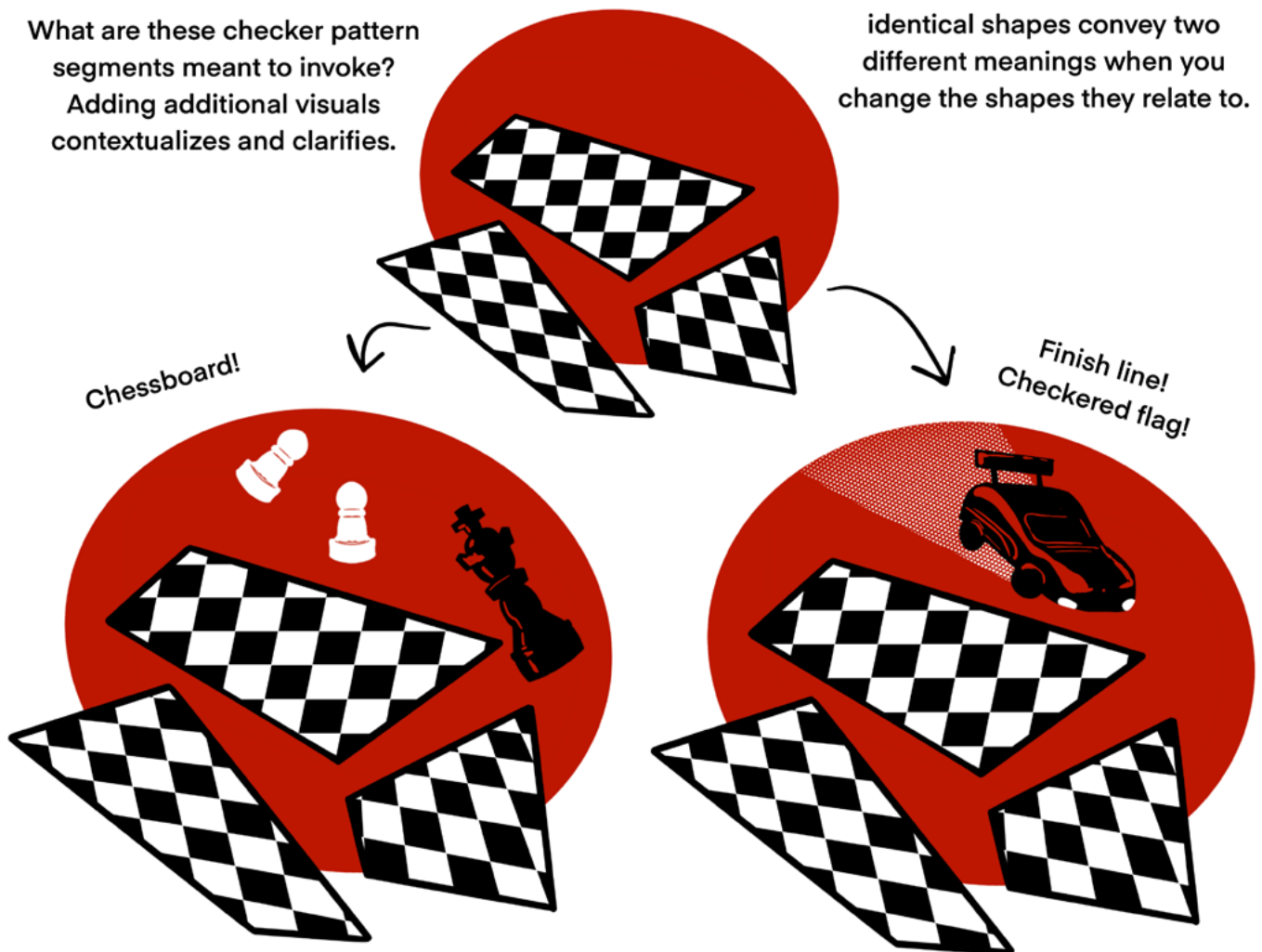
A physical relationship means the objects are being portrayed as existing in the same physical space, and as such they have some form of material interaction. This applies to more heavily abstracted physical spaces too.

The added figure, cat, and birds physically relate to the drawing they've been added into. Even the flying birds, which don't come into contact with anything, are relating physically because we understand them as present in the environment.

Some artwork does its best to accurately represent physical space, and as such the hierarchy of these shapes can be understood primarily through their positioning within an imagined 3d environment. Consider a realistically drawn interior piece with accurate linear perspective. In these cases, understanding the composition of an image becomes rooted heavily in understanding the image's framing, almost like a movie still or a photograph. All the shape language exists in architecture, in objects, in camera angles. There is plenty of active decision making being made in selecting subject matter, but there is very little abstraction. Let's talk about what shape hierarchy looks like in real space so we can establish a baseline understanding of the concept.

The following photographs are all from The Rug Company UK's blog post Stairways to Heaven which showcases some runner rugs they've installed on staircases.
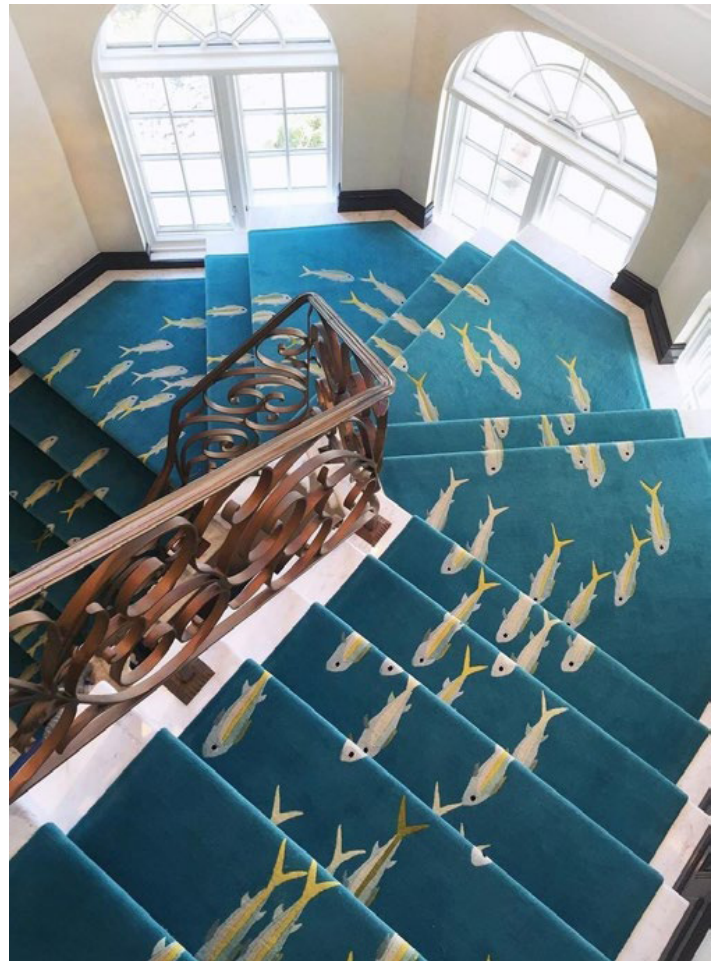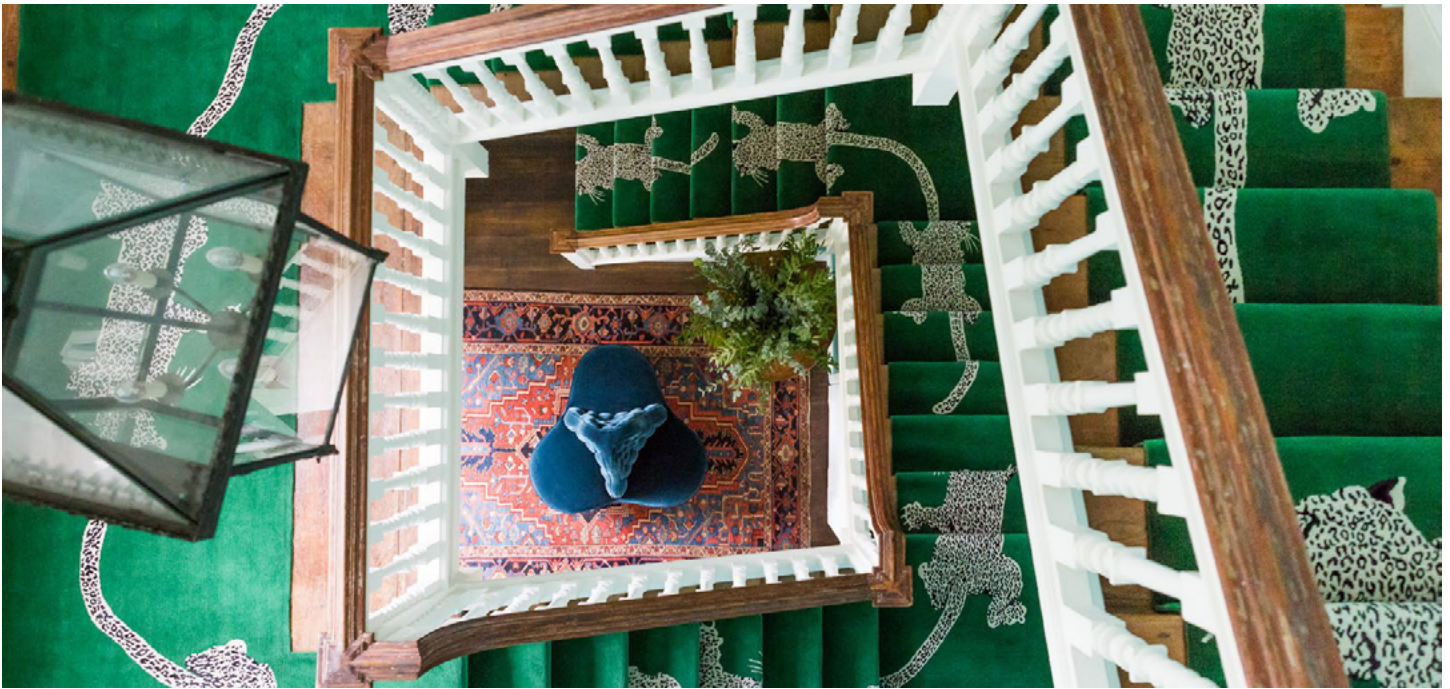
All of these images are conceptually identical: top down photos of staircases meant to showcase the patterned runner rugs on them. Despite that, they all have a distinctly different appearance and feel. The first and last are both dominated by these large spirals that travel visually inward, although our understanding of space lets us know the'yre actually traveling downward. The second one is just a single U-shaped bend. The first spiral is rounded and curved, and is cut through by the dramatic vertical of the chandelier. The last is blocky and square, and it frames the compositional elements that are positioned in its center. There are different dominant shapes that have different interactions with each other. As such, they have different shape hierarchies.

Now, forgive me for being repetitive, but we can understand that these pieces feel different because the geometry of the physical objects that exist in these spaces is different. The visual relationship of these objects is inherently linked to their physical relationship, because these are real locations. In short, we implicitly understand the unwritten rules that govern the relationships between the shapes in these images, because it's the same set of rules that governs how objects exist in reality. I'm sure you can see where I'm going with this: **how do we assess the relationships between shapes when these rules no longer apply?**

It's no secret that I prefer abstracted visuals, but when you abandon the struc-ture of physical space you end up having to do a lot more decision making. It becomes up to you to decide what the 'right' way for objects to relate to each other is.

Let's revisit the drawings of mine we looked at earlier and try unpacking the shape relations happening therein.

Consider this drawing. There's one part of this drawing that I consider to be really in-congruent with the rest. I'd like to prompt you now to take a long, hard look at everything and try and figure out which portion of the drawing it is.

So, which part of this drawing is 'off?' Your answer might be different than mine, but I hope you picked one. I promise it won't hurt my feelings. Here's my answer:

Okay, now that you know the what I'll give you one last chance to think about the why before I tell you. This isn't a trick question or anything, I'm just trying to get you to consider shapes in a way that feels natural to you before I go about implanting you with my own mindset.

...

...

...

Got something?

Alright.

So we're talking about how objects relate to each other and how they exist in space. Overall, the objects in this drawing are somewhat stylized, but not super abstracted, meaning they have a pretty representational and grounded shape to them individually. The abstraction comes in with the space. The only real relationship these objects have to each other is how far back in space they are. There's no real environment to contextualize these objects, just a multicolored void. Their scale is completely nonsensical and arbitrary. These shapes interact visually, overlapping and intermingling with each other, but none of them really interact contextually or physically. The closest we get is the way the microphone cord loops around the piano keys.

The opposite of almost all of this is true of the portion I isolated. The buildings and figures there are the least representational but most heavily contextualized visuals in the entire piece. They're silhouetted and flat with far more pronounced exaggeration than everything else, which stands out from the visual language of the rest of the drawing. The scale they have with each other implies the figures and the buildings exist in the same space, which means they have contextual and physical relationships that almost everything else lacks.

This is something it's much easier to realize in post than while you're working, which is why that section managed to make it into the finished drawing even after 36 hours of painting. I don't think like this while I'm actually constructing a drawing; I tend to work really instinctually. It's not until you actually have everything on the page that you can fully assess the way it all interrelates, which is why this is such a tricky process. Go back through your old art and take a look at some of your more fully fleshed out pieces. Do you find yourself subconsciously making any 'rules' that govern the visuals within a drawing like I've done with this? If so, what are they? What is it about arranging visuals in this manner that appeals to you? Taking an active critical eye towards decisions you made intuitively helps hone and sharpen that intuition.

Now lets move on to the next example.

We're now going to cover why I present these relationships as hierarchical. For all I've used the term hierarchy up to this point, I've yet to establish any sort of pecking order within these concepts. The truth is, some parts of an image are more important than others. It's up to you to decide which ones are which, and design the rest of your composition to compliment them. If you have trouble instinctually prioritizing your shapes, a good way to think about the hierarchy is to split your visuals into three categories: conceptually necessary, aesthetically necessary, and decorative.

A conceptually necessary element is going to be a piece of your drawing that, if removed, would mean your drawing no longer is functionally capable of conveying what it was intended to convey. Even if all you're conveying is 'here's an anime character I like,' you're still going through the act of combining visual elements to make that happen. It might be tempting to think of 'conceptually necessary elements' and 'subject matter' as equivalent, but that's a bit too much of an oversimplification. Sometimes, parts of your drawing that aren't the direct subject of the piece are necessary to convey its intended purpose.

Here's this drawing pared down to only the elements I consider to be conceptually necessary.

To me, these three figures and the central interior that frames them are what this drawing is actually a drawing of. Despite the bedroom in the top right of the drawing being part of the original rough sketch this drawing was developed from, I consider that area pretty extraneous because even now I don't really know why I decided to put it there. It was a pretty arbitrary decision that was mostly for framing purposes.

So since this is the core of the drawing, everything else in the composition exists to reinforce and strengthen these elements. On their own, these elements might be interesting, but they're not very well-balanced or compelling, in my opinion. This crop lacks almost anything from the full drawing that gives it its impact. This is the base of a full composition, with no finish. A cake waiting to be iced.

Flipping the script, here's the drawing with everything except the conceptually necessary elements.

Even when stripped of the central visuals that serve as subject matter, this drawing still has a very similar vibe to the original. This is because all of the elements that give it its impact are still present. If the previous drawing was an un-iced cake, then this is a piece of styrofoam covered in frosting. All finish, no substance.

(A bit of an aside, but worth emphasizing: I'm not calling this image substanceless because it's now much more heavily abstracted. Art that lacks conventional subject matter has plenty to say, if that's your intention.)

So then, what happening here is aesthetically necessary? Aka, what is the thing that gives this drawing its distinct visual flavor? In my opinion, it's the texturing. The heavy lines of corrugation, the prominent overlay of abstracted buildings, the pops of halftone, and the subtler instances of a square brick pattern give this drawing the depth and grit that really make it pop. Let's see what it looks like without those. Here's the full drawing again, now with everything except the visual elements I have deemed aesthetically necessary.

Try to ignore the texturing left over on the figures, if you can. The layering on this one is what you might call "nightmarish" and there are some places it couldn't be stripped. The background has been blurred to remove the texture while attempting to preserve the larger shapes made by the color distribution which is why there's a little bit of an odd glowyness. Can't be helped.

Not even really a whole lot to say about this one. It's a drawing, it's got all the components of a functional composition. It's decently balanced and the space is mostly filled well. It's just lacking any real appeal. There's no flavor! No oomph! This is an undecorated grocery store sheet cake.

It might seem odd to talk about texturing in the shape section of a composition tutorial, but my approach to art involves interpreting as much through the lens of shape as physically possible. There's actually still a texture overlay on this image that I intentionally left in place; a paper texture on top of the whole thing that lacks any shapelike elements and is just what I'd consider to be true noise. Textures like the corrugation, bricks, and city buildings are just a way of introducing rectangular patterning into key points of the drawing, and the halftone is circular patterning. This will probably make a bit more sense when we talk about rhythm, so shove it to the back of your mind for just a tad longer.

I'm sure you can guess where we're going next. The last thing we haven't isolated is the decoration. Elements that are decoration can be thought of as elements whose absence will not fundamentally alter the drawing. Here's the drawing with the decoration removed.

Not too terrible looking! Just a bit empty! You can see that this drawing's got the right content and the right vibe. It's really just missing some stuff to fill up the empty space. Important to note that decoration isn't by its nature extraneous. You can have a birthday cake without candles and get a nice treat out of it, but you'll still feel like something was missing. Just because they're not load-bearing components of the composition doesn't mean they aren't adding a lot of value or appeal.

Of the decoration in this image, the bedroom in the upper right and the airplanes in the bottom do have some contextual relation to the more conceptually important parts of the drawing. Earlier I said that I didn't know why I put the bedroom there, and that remains true, but I think it helps add a feeling of intimacy which the piece is otherwise lacking. A bedroom is a private space, so seeing a bedroom can often encourage an increased feeling of closeness to the subject matter. The planes then pivot the other way; distance, travel. The bedroom pairs with the figures for an intimate quiet whereas the planes pair with the cityscape for an impersonal metropolitan bustle.

The wispy, smoky trails and glowing squiggles are purely visual. Despite that, the squiggles are one of my favorite things in this drawing and one of the first elements I added when I was coloring. A lot of this drawing was actually designed to fit around those squiggles. They're critical!

We're just about ready to wrap up this section, but before we go let's just look at a side by side comparison of these last few edits with the original image to help solidify our understanding of the piece.

Full Drawing

Without conceptually necessary elements

Without aesthetically necessary elements

Without decoration

rhythm

This is another tricky one. Don't worry – this is going to be the last tricky one until we get into talking about comics. Essentially, rhythm is the flow of your shape hierarchy. At least, that's how I think about it. As you are drawn through the shapes in an image, how smooth or choppy is that ride? Another way to think about rhythm is shape contrast. A drawing that repeats a lot of similar shapes in similar sizes is going to feel very even and consistent, like a steady drum beat, whereas something with a lot of variation might feel more like a guitar solo.

If the analogy is a little bit too out there for you, you can try thinking of it as just patterns and contrast in shape language, but I believe rhythm as a descriptor more accurately conveys the way I conceptualize it. It's something you have to feel. Reducing it down to technical descriptors undercuts it a bit. It would be very convenient if artistic concepts could be reduced to technicalities, but then we run the risk of making it not art anymore. Unfortunate.

As we mentioned earlier, contrast creates points of interest. This holds true for shape language as much as anything else. Contrast in shape isn't quite as clear cut as other forms of contrast, and there are a few ways to approach it. In character design and animation, the concept of straight vs curves is used to manage the rhythm of a figure, and this can be extended to larger compositions too. Another way of thinking about it could be to consider the prevalence of geometric vs organic shapes.

Geometric shapes are shapes that have a mathematical regularity to them. They abide by certain linear and curvilinear principles. When you think of 'shapes' in the abstract, you're almost undoubtedly thinking about geometric shapes. Organic shapes are shapes that are more naturalistic, and lack this mathematical precision.

geometric

organic
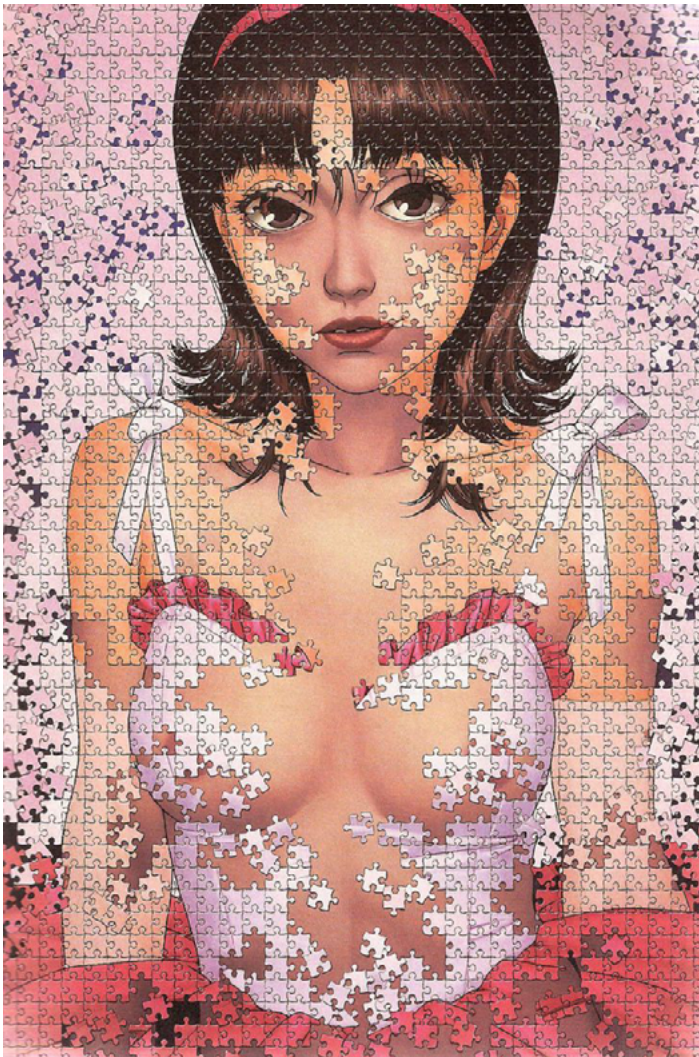
Let's see what this kind of shape contrast looks like when executed well: this is the cover illustration for the Perfect Blue storyboard book, done by Satoshi Kon himself. On the surface level, this drawing is really simple. We have a prominent, central bust-shot of a character that's broken up and complicated by the disorganized puzzle piece thrown on top of it. It's still an extremely compelling image and that's because it has an incredibly strong rhythm in its use of shape that serves to add visual interest and complexity without adding extra elements. I'll break down my interpretation of this piece and its rhythm for you.
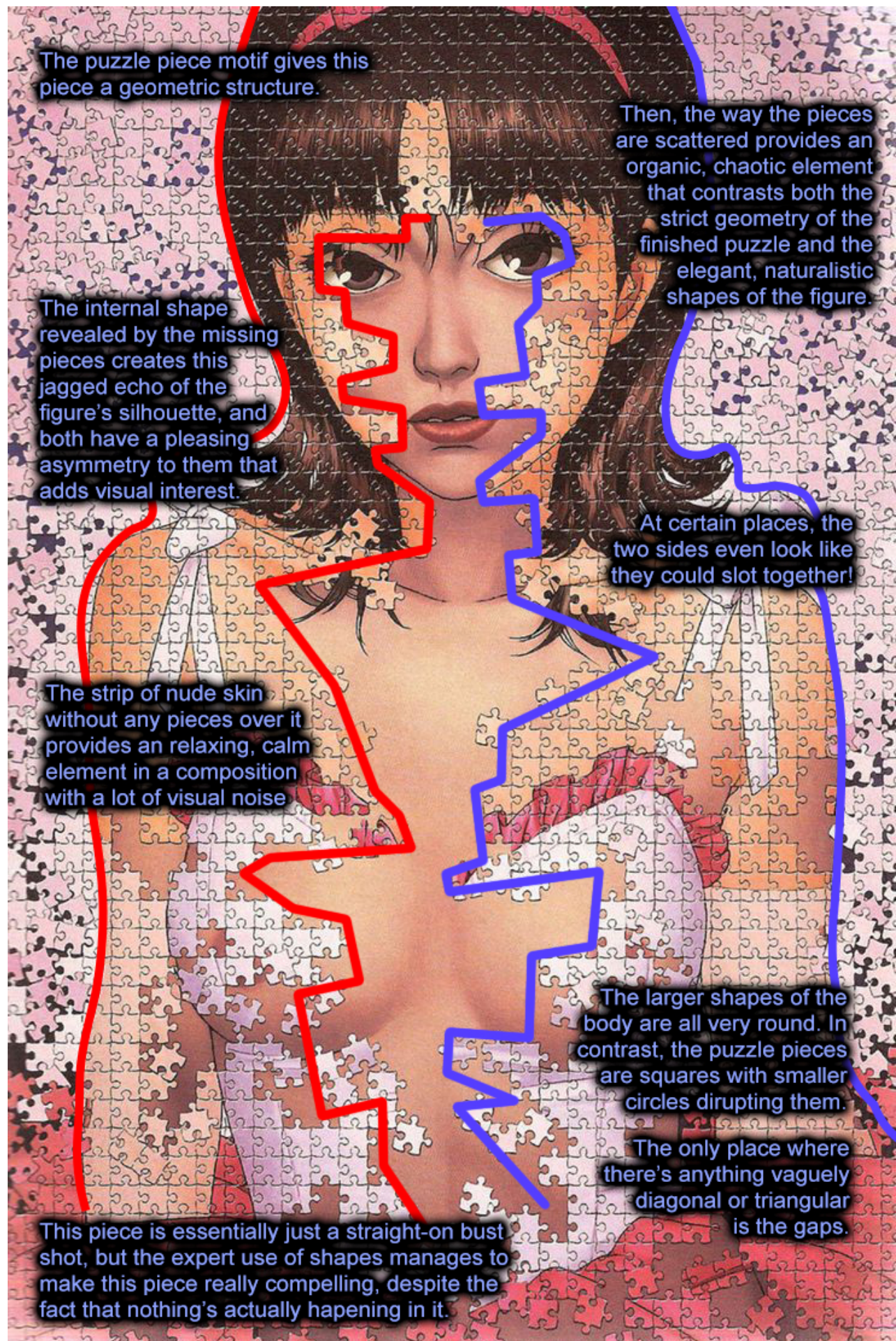
The puzzle piece motif gives this piece a geometric structure.

Then, the way the pieces are scattered provides an organic, chaotic element that contrasts both the strict geometry of the finished puzzle and the elegant, naturalistic shapes of the figure.

The internal shape revealed by the missing pieces creates this jagged echo of the figure's silhouette, and both have a pleasing asymmetry to them that adds visual interest.

At certain places, the two sides even look like they could slot together!
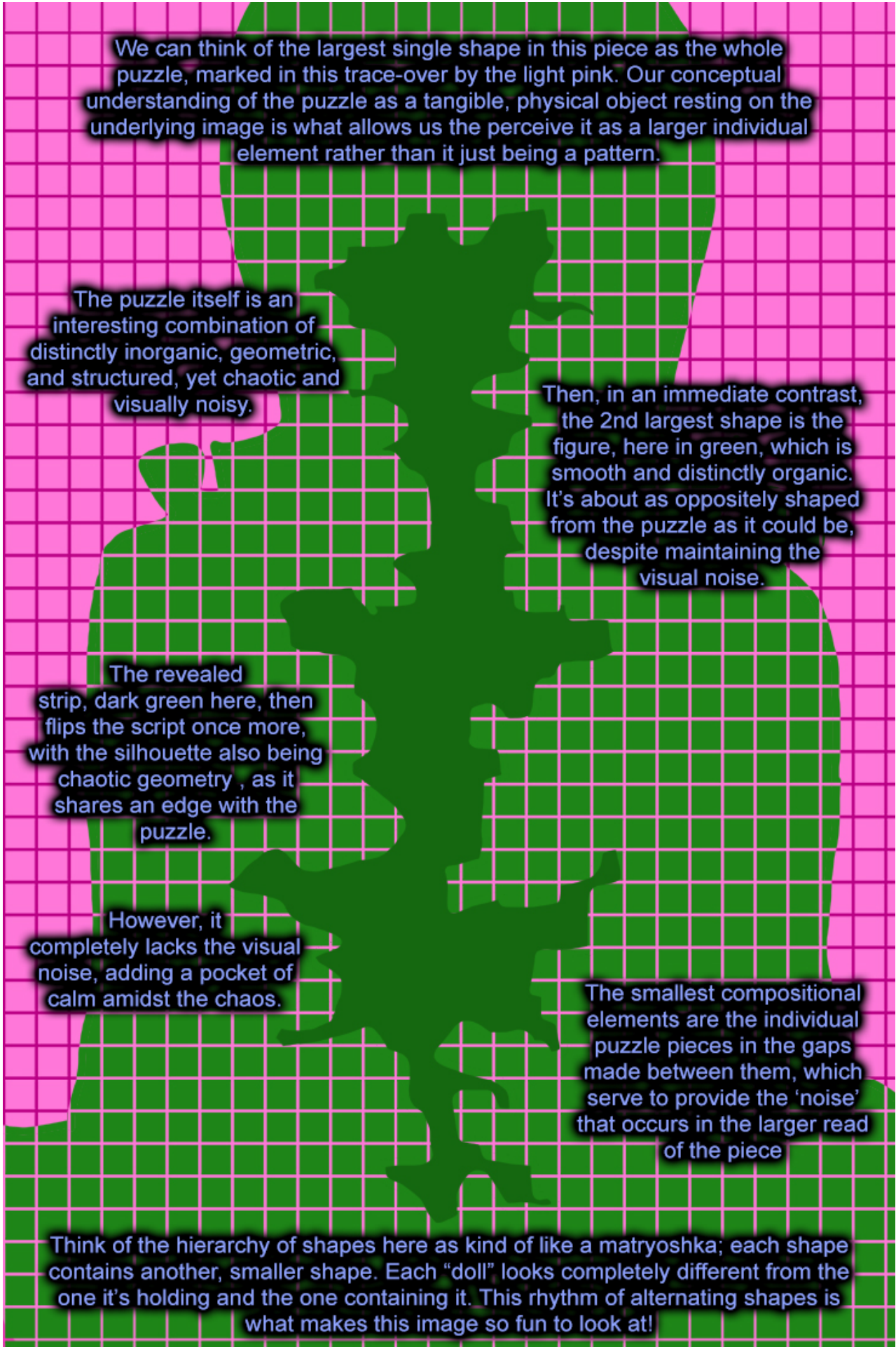
The strip of nude skin without any pieces over it provides an relaxing, calm element in a composition with a lot of visual noise

The larger shapes of the body are all very round. In contrast, the puzzle pieces are squares with smaller circles dirupting them.

The only place where there's anything vaguely diagonal or triangular is the gaps.

This piece is essentially just a straight-on bust shot, but the expert use of shapes manages to make this piece really compelling, despite the fact that nothing's actually hapening in it.

We can think of the largest single shape in this piece as the whole puzzle, marked in this trace-over by the light pink. Our conceptual understanding of the puzzle as a tangible, physical object resting on the underlying image is what allows us the perceive it as a larger individual element rather than it just being a pattern.

The puzzle itself is an interesting combination of distinctly inorganic, geometric, and structured, yet chaotic and visually noisy.

Then, in an immediate contrast, the 2nd largest shape is the figure, here in green, which is smooth and distinctly organic. It's about as oppositely shaped from the puzzle as it could be, despite maintaining the visual noise.

The revealed strip, dark green here, then flips the script once more, with the silhouette also being chaotic geometry , as it shares an edge with the puzzle.

However, it completely lacks the visual noise, adding a pocket of calm amidst the chaos.

The smallest compositional elements are the individual puzzle pieces in the gaps made between them, which serve to provide the 'noise' that occurs in the larger read of the piece

Think of the hierarchy of shapes here as kind of like a matryoshka; each shape contains another, smaller shape. Each "doll" looks completely different from the one it's holding and the one containing it. This rhythm of alternating shapes is what makes this image so fun to look at!

With that said, geometric vs organic isn't really my go-to for thinking about rhythm. I'm much likely to consider something on the grounds of whether or not the shapes are simple or complex. Whereas the concept of a geometric shape vs an organic shape is pretty static and immutable, complexity is relative, and thinking of relative terms vs absolute terms is almost always more helpful in art. Overall, geometric shapes are more likely to be simple and organic shapes are more likely to be complex, but that's not always true.

Some geometric elements have a lot of complexity. Some organic elements are incredibly simple.
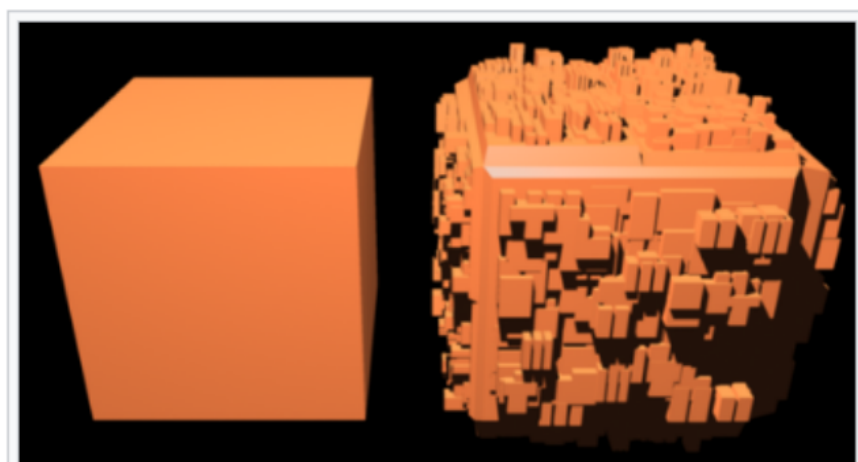
A cube and its greebled version

The venation within the bract of a lime tree

I'm going to show you some drawings in full, and then the same drawings blocked out based on the presence of simple shapes (in blue) and complicated shapes (in yellow). As you look at them, try and take in the larger balance/proportion of simple vs. complex areas. Where they are in the page, what percentage of the image is taken up by each, etc. You might disagree about my assignment of some areas as simple vs complex – that's perfectly legit. Like I said before, this is relative. Like everything else we've been doing here this is an exercise in active conceptualization. You have to make decisions about how you understand and interpret visuals. In areas where there's some ambiguity or where you disagree with me, try and imagine what line of internal logic I'm using to make the judgment call. How does it differ from yours?
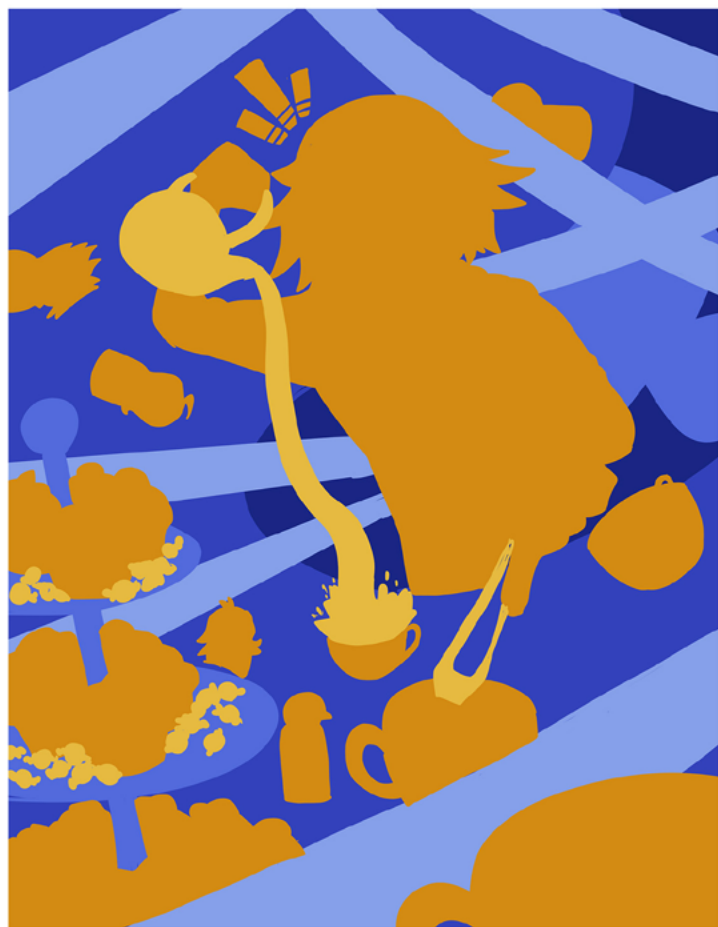
As you can see, the ratio and distribution of simple shapes vs complicated shapes in each drawing tends to be pretty balanced for me. What counts as simple or complicated is also heavily dependent on the context. In the top left example of the second set, even the 'complex' shapes are pretty basic. I also tend to treat cluster elements as simple even if they technically have complex silhouettes, such as the paper burst or the staircase in the first set of examples.

If you want to keep really tight reins on your rhythm, rather than focusing on types of shapes, you can prioritize specific individual shapes that repeatedly show up in your composition. This can either be from a consistent patterning in them (think the puzzle pieces in the Satoshi Kon piece we looked at previously) or by a less consistent introduction of the shape at various points in a composition. Let's revisit those Utena screenshots one last time for the road.
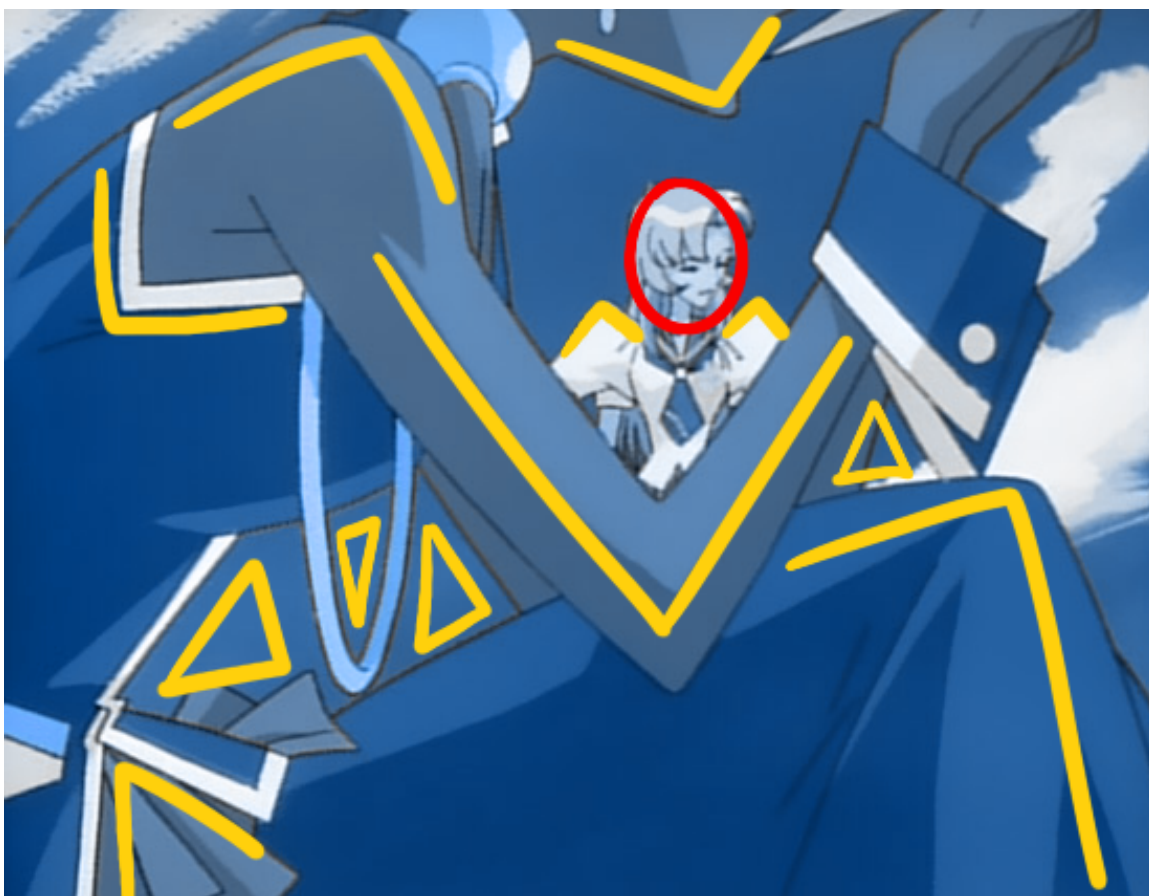
As mentioned before, this one's composed primarily of angular/triangular elements at different scale/rotation, with the primary point of shape contrast being the central figure's head.

In this screenshot, all of the gaps in the tree branches can be thought of as variations on this elongated, tapered shape on a slight diagonal. For visual clarity I didn't bother marking off any of the places where this shape occurs on the cast shadows on the ground, but you can clearly see this is a prominent rhythm even in that area. The vertical column of the tree and figure are the primary contrast.
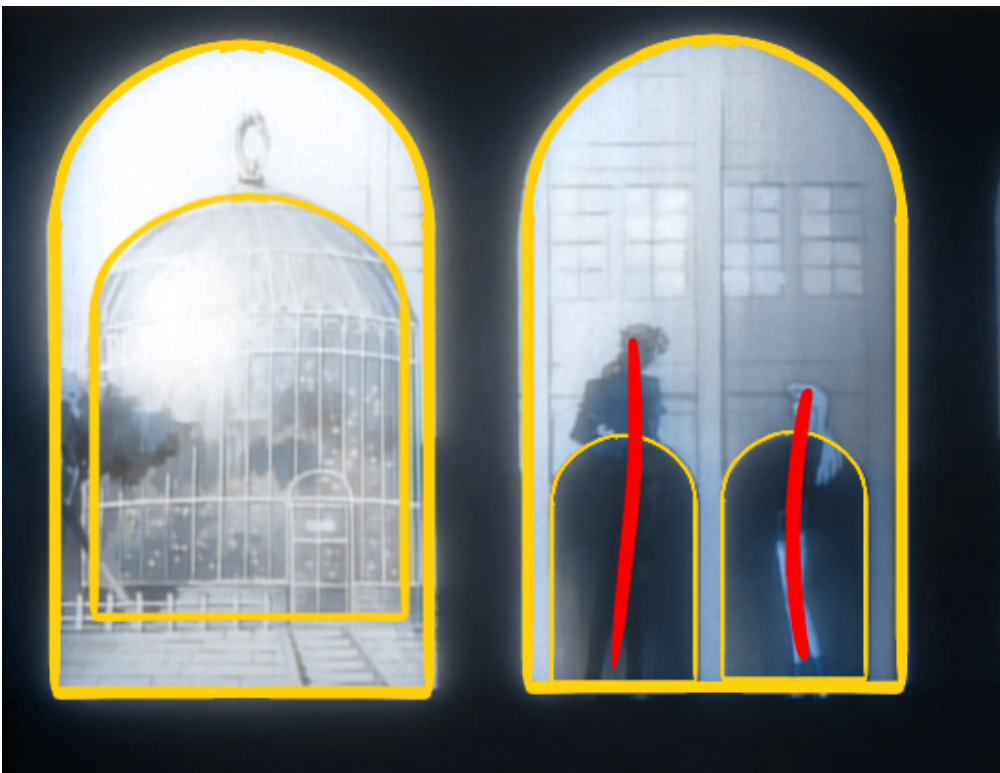
Finally, this one repeats the large domed rectangle shape through it several times, while the verticals of the figures serve as the contrast.

Pretty straightforward stuff. So let's flip the script on it a bit! Now that we understand rhythm with contrast, let's look at rhythm without contrast. Throughout this entire thing we've been pretty focused on understanding how variation within a piece creates interest, but plenty of art that's consistent within itself is appealing because a lack of traditional focal area makes you engage with it differently. It's a different rhythm to a piece.

Thought Cabinet by Anton Vill. Art done for the game Disco Elysium, which is an absolute masterpiece in terms of both visuals and writing and you should really play it. This piece in particular is gorgeous. There's no clear focal point on this, which is absolutely part of its appeal. Every part is visually distinct but it's also got an undeniable consistency in the way shapes are used. The curling, fleshlike protrusions. The various faces scattered through. The lumpiness of it all. It's chaotic and disturbing, but the overall balance of the piece and lack of any real visual jank make it oddly calm. There's an overall stability to it despite the unsettling nature of each individual component.
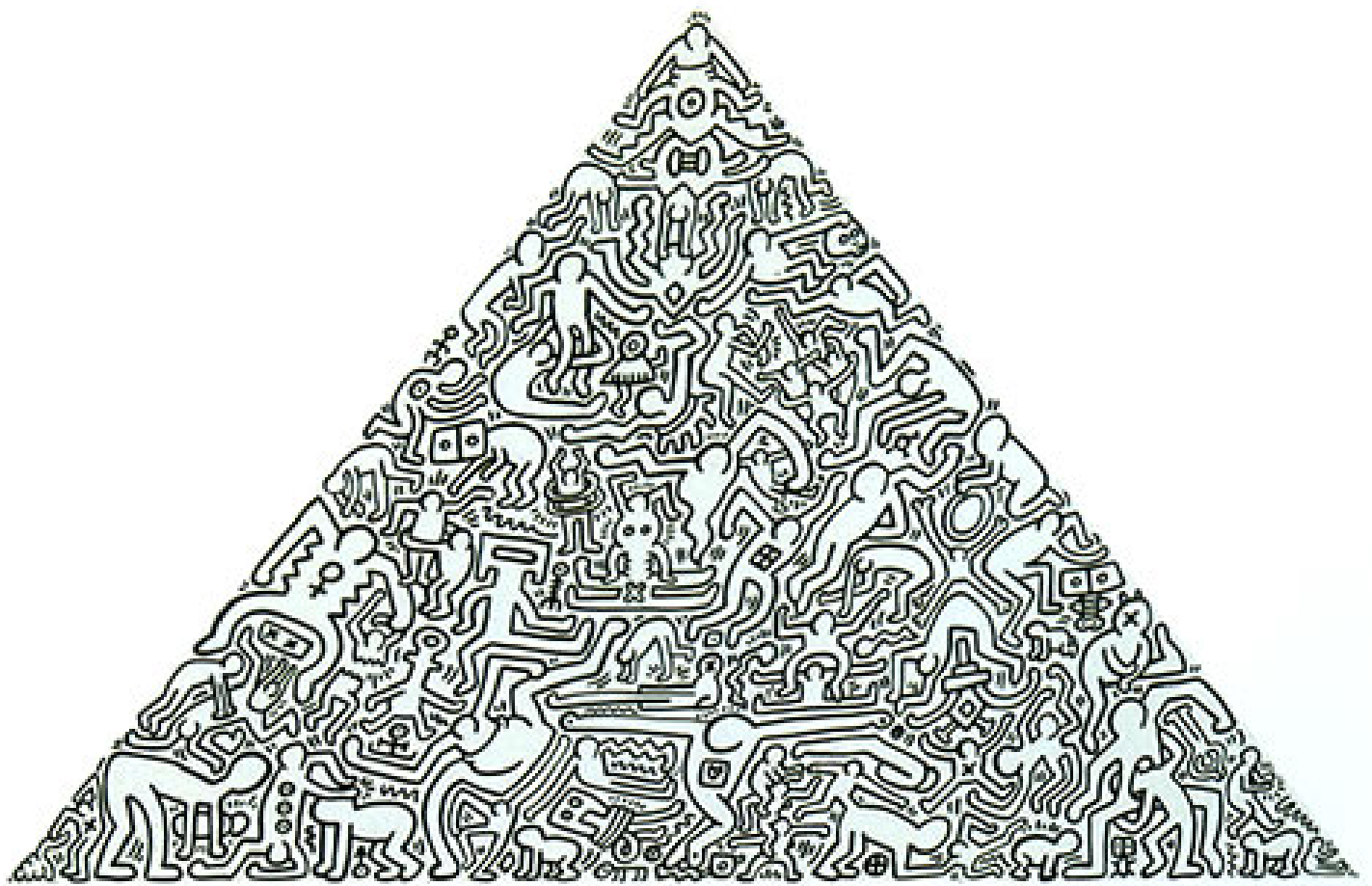
An untitled work by Keith Haring from 1990. In some ways, oddly similar to Thought Cabinet. Both could loosely be described as a series of bizarre humanoid figures in a cluster surrounded by squiggling protrusions, but they have completely opposite effects. Whereas Vill used complex forms and fully rendered elements to create something disproportionately serene, Haring is using plain black and white figures simplified to the point of iconography to make an extremely lively feeling piece. The decision to use a triangular composition rather than a rectangular one is part of that. Haring's art is incredibly simplified and shape-heavy, but despite that it's been incredibly impactful and that's no doubt due to his ability to use those simple shapes for all they're worth.

I spy a lion and eight other cats,
A shell from the ocean, a fish who wears hats;

A horse that rocks and a horse that rolls,
A button with a square and one without holes.

I Spy photography by Walter Wick

Finally, we're going to step outside of the world of painting and illustration and take our section on shape full–circle with a return to photography. I had to put both of these in here because I couldn't pick just one, I like them way too much. These photos are by Walter Wick for the I Spy series of books. His work is just some of my favorite art ever, period. Everything he does is so delightful. The I Spy books are really interesting because the entire purpose of the composition is to obscure the important parts, not highlight them. Similar line of thought can be applied to Martin Handford's Where's Waldo illustrations. Stuff like that inverts the standard relationship between composition and viewer; rather than the composition communicating the importance of a specific element to the viewer, the composition is completely arbitrary, and the importance of any one element is a completely external fabrication that the viewer is expected to impose onto the art. What's not great about that! Also they have a bunch of fun little objects in them!

These compositions have a really excellent balance to them. There's a very obvious level of artifice to these objects' plaacement. Despite the fact that they're just scattered objects, there is no mistaking the placement of any element for incidental. There's just enough of a naturalistic quality to everything's positioning that it doesn't feel too gridlike and stale, but the overall evenness in spacing between objects and the pleasant way things line up means it is unmistakably deliberate.

And that'll just about do it for our shape sections! I wouldn't doubt that this section has raised more questions than it answered, but I'd like to think it means you're now much more capable of making sure any questions raised are specific and meaningful.

There will never be a point in your life when you stop making drawings that look Kinda Off. It's just not possible. But it is entirely possible to reach a point where you are capable of understanding why it looks off, and that's the first step to fixing it. This level of critical thought also allows you to understand what does work about the art you like. Knowing which parts of a drawing are actually contributing to its appeal makes it that much easier to pull inspiration from them.

IV. TANGENTS

There's no justification for tangents having their own entire section other than the fact that they're something I'm very particular about and I want to really emphasize their importance to my process. There's not too much to say here, but it's a little bit of advice that goes a very long way. I would say that my neurotic avoidance of tangents has been the single most influential factor in the way my specific compositional tastes have developed. Don't underestimate how much keeping this one thing in mind can improve your art!

avoiding tangents

First of all – what the hell is a tangent? In a 2011 blog post, Chris Schweizer refers to tangents as occurring "when two or more lines interact in a way that insinuates a relationship between them that the artist did not intend." This is a marvelously succinct description. In fact, everything Schweizer has to say about tangents is marvelously succinct, so instead of wasting anyone's time, I'm just going to link you to it.

The Schweizer Guide To Spotting Tangents

Seriously. Go read that.

Schweizer, as a more traditional concept artist, is approaching tangents primarily through line, but it doesn't take too much mental reconfiguring to imagine how it applies to shape. Essentially think of line as a shape's edge instead. Or don't. Maybe you're a lines person. I won't judge too loudly. This guide is kind of a lot of specifics though, so what I'm going to do now is provide you with my own streamlined rules for tangents.

NO!
edge contact creates visual tension and reduces both clarity and any sense of hierarchy in the larger shapes
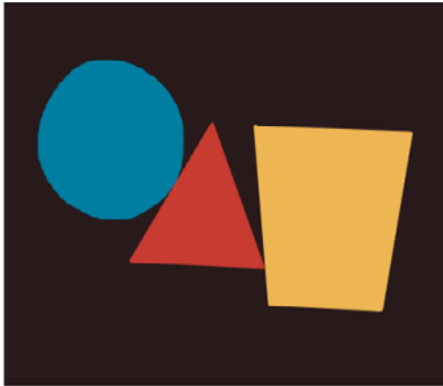
YES!
shapes are either significantly overlapping or maintain distance

NO!
All 3 edges intersect at the same point, pulling focus where it shouldnt be.

YES!
Only two edges ever meet at a single point, shapes are distinct.

As much as I physically can, I obey these two rules to the letter for every shape no matter how small and insignificant. You can get away with being significantly less finicky with tangents than I am, but my advice is to try and get really used to at least spotting them even if you're not inclined to fix them. The better you are at spotting them, the better you'll be at avoiding drawing them in the first place. The appeal and clarity of your compositions is guaranteed to improve once you start taking tangents into consideration.

That's really as much as there is to say about avoiding tangents as a general rule. Now let's talk about using them on purpose.

using tangents

Of course you can use tangents on purpose. This whole thing has been about making active choices in your art. There are an infinite number of ways you could use tangents meaningfully. The presence of heavy tangents in a work serves to flatten it. If you're seeking to push a piece in a more stylized, geometric direction there could be a lot to gain from intentional use of tangents. Let's just take a look at a couple of examples to get the gears churning. Considering my specialty is avoiding tangents, I don't have too much to say on the matter, but hopefully if this is something you're interested in this can be a jumping off point for further research done on your own time.

These are first examples arescreenshots from The Secret of Kells (2009) by Cartoon Saloon. Cartoon Saloon has a fantastic style, some of the most unique looking feature animation that's been made. It's heavily geometric with a very nonliteral use of space, and frequently relies on tangents both within its character designs and in its layouts.
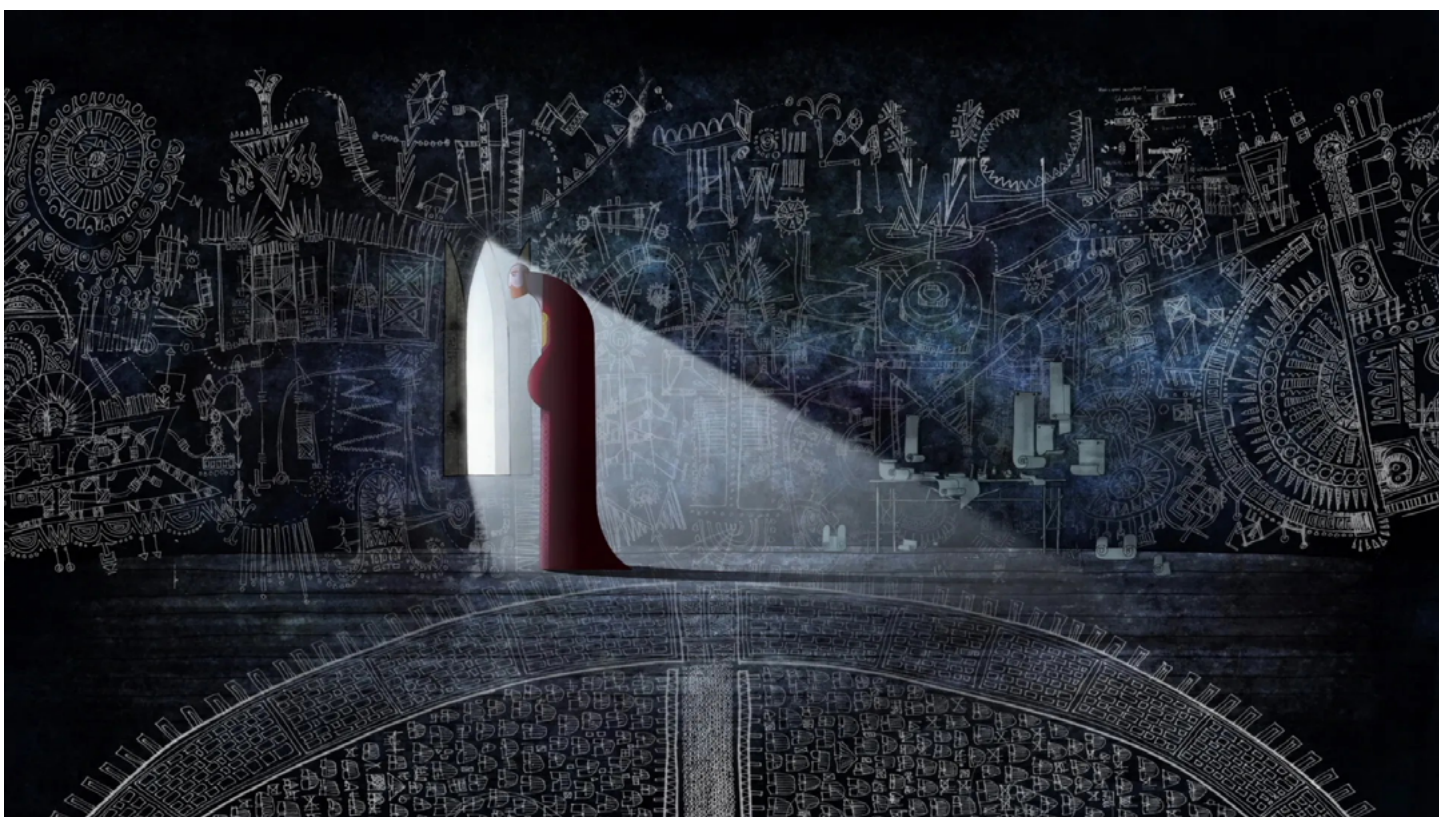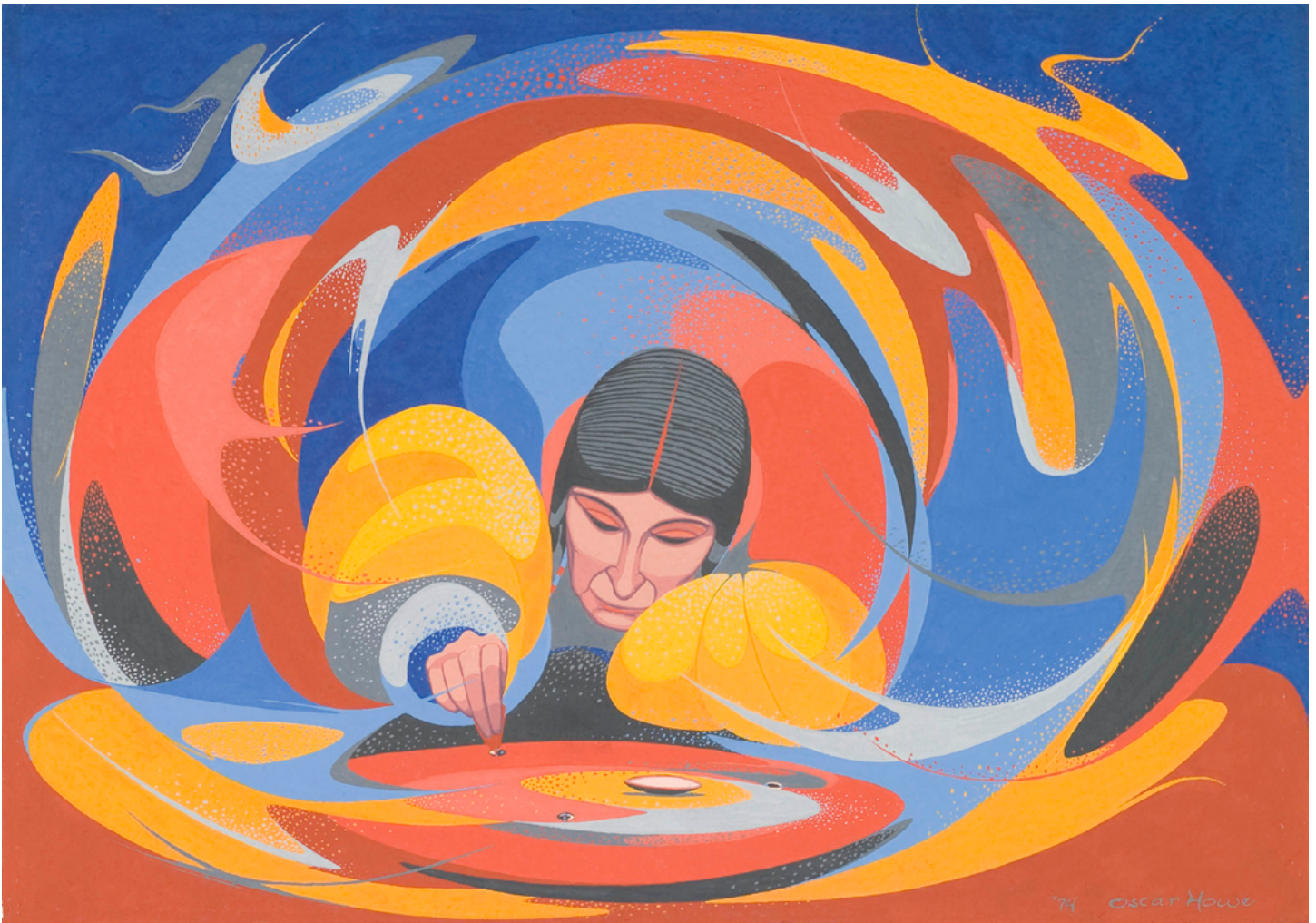
Oscar Howe, Sioux Seed Player (c. 1974)

 I really love this one, the colors, the shapes, it's just so pleasing to look at. Howe was a Yanktonai Dakota artist whose body of work was very influential on the landscape of native art. Speaking in incredibly generalized terms, you'll find a lot of first nations art that uses heavy geometry and patterning, especially in textiles. Contemporaries will frequently pair this geometric sensibilities with more modern subjects and style, and it makes for some great stuff.

Patrick Dengate, Locomotives

Cubism as a style is often going to have intentional use of tangents. I don't have a ton to say on the subject because I'm pretty neutral on cubism as a whole, but it would feel like an oversight to not mention it here as it's an egregious example of the thing. Probably one of the most instantly recognizable art movements in history. Hard to forget cubism – it's the one with all the cubes.

And on that rather lukewarm note, I've given you pretty much all I have to offer on this subject. It feels odd to me to have so little to say on something so significant to my process, but this is one of those things that is really more meaningful practiced than preached. Good luck!

IV. CONTRAST

As mentioned earlier, contrast decides which parts of your drawing will catch the eye fastest. We discussed shape contrast specifically in the shape language section, but now I want to talk about adjusting contrast in a piece after you've already settled on a layout. Once again, I under-stand this is kind of an odd thing to bring up in a guide to composition, because it's really more of a stylistic finish concern. That said, here we will be talking about how to change the immediate focal area in a piece, which is a compositional concern. I really believe that taking as holistic an approach as possible to composition is the right thing to do. Almost everything you can do to your drawing will emphasize or de-emphasize specific areas, and at the end of the day it affects the big read of your piece whether or not you think of it as composition.

There are three main ways of effecting contrast on a completed layout: value, focus, and color. I'll address each one in turn. We'll be using a set of lines we saw earlier as the base composition we're iterating on.

value

Crash course in the concept of value: it refers to how dark or light some-thing is. 9/10 times when someone talks about contrast in art they're gonna be referring to value contrast, which is why I'm talking about this one first. When working in digital color, the brightness of any given area can be represented numerically 0 (pure black) to 100 (pure white). In the following examples, I'll have numbers up on the right hand side of the image – those numbers correspond to the brightness of that specific tone. It's a good way to see exactly to what degree one area is lighter or dark-er than another.

Here's a really basic value comp. I've split this drawing into four distinct value areas: the foreground, the middle ground, background, and the lightsource, which is the window. On the rare occasions when I'm actually blocking out values for stuff, I'll be much more exacting about my value areas than this and try to map out actual shadow/highlight locations, but that would have complicated these examples to a nightmarish degree. Just understand that what you're seeing here is significantly simplified in service of making a point.

In this particular example the values step down evenly, with each new shade being 25% darker than the last. An interesting quirk is that, at least to me, the difference in value between 50% and 25% feels much more significant than 75% and 50%. When it comes to finicky stuff like that, always trust your eye. It knows more about art than the computer does.

With this value spread, the foreground has the most visual weight to it. It's pulling the focus. Lets see how we can change that.

All I've done here is drop the midground value down to be significantly closer to the foreground value. This makes the foreground and midground similarly weighted, so the new highest point of contrast is at the place where the midground is meeting the background. This shifts focus to the midground. But now we've lost some of the contrast between the foreground and middleground. If we wanted to make those two areas contrast without tearing focus away from the middleground, here's how I'd address that.

Now we've stepped down the foreground value to be significantly darker. The foreground is immediately distinct from the midground, but it doesn't pull focus away because it's too dark to make out any detail there. We can understand what's happening in the foreground because the shapes are strong and we can see the lineart if we're really dwelling on it, but for the most part our attention is on the middle ground.

Which of these value scales is the best? Whichever one you like the most.

I made a handful of passes to toss some color on this thing right after I first finished the lineart and didn't get beyond really roughly blocking it in, but just for fun, let's shove those color roughs into grayscale and see what sort of values I ended up with.

This is definitely closest to the second set of values up there, where the foreground and midground are actually pretty close in value. Guess that's just what the mood was at the time.

Anyway, this is a pretty simple concept and elaborating on it more would be outside of the scope of this writeup, so I'll leave it at that.

focus

This is probably the shortest and simplest section of this entire thing. Congratulations on making it this far. Basically, stuff that's in focus (e.g not blurry) contrasts with stuff that is out of focus (e.g blurry.) If one part of your drawing is pulling too much unwanted attention you can just, like, kinda blur it a little to dampen that effect.

Here's a version where the foreground and background are slightly out of focus, meaning the middleground stands out crisply and clearly as our focal area.

Here's a version where the middleground and background are blurred, so the foreground is in focus. Yes, it is literally that simple. There's no trick here. Overdoing it can look cheesy but that's true of anything.

For kicks, here's a version of one of our earlier thumbs with some blurring tossed on to show how these types of contrast can work in tandem with each other.

Man look at this, it looks like a drawing or something. Impressive. Okay, moving on.

color

Color is a doozy man. It's a huge doozy. I like color theory a lot, and if I talked about it as much as I wanted to, this section would be really really long. Color contrast is like value contrast on steroids because it contains value contrast within it, but the rules are a little bit funny due to the fact that colors have a perceived value that doesn't mechanically translate into digital color space. As such, hue and saturation play a huge part in color contrast. Originally I had a lot of detailed explanations about all this stuff planned to go in here but as I'm sitting and typing it I'm realizing that's so unnecessary and a huge waste of everyone's time, so let's make this as comically oversimplified as possible.

Color contrast comes into play when you're working with complementary or near-complementary color combinations.

Colors oposite from each other on the color wheel are complementary. Complementary colors have inherently good contrast with each other. If you're not sure how to make the contrast really POP in your colors, that's a good crutch to lean on.
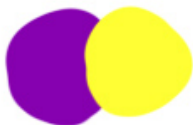
My favorite color pairing is blue and yellow. I just think she offers every-thing. Here's this drawing with some blue and yellow tossed onto it.
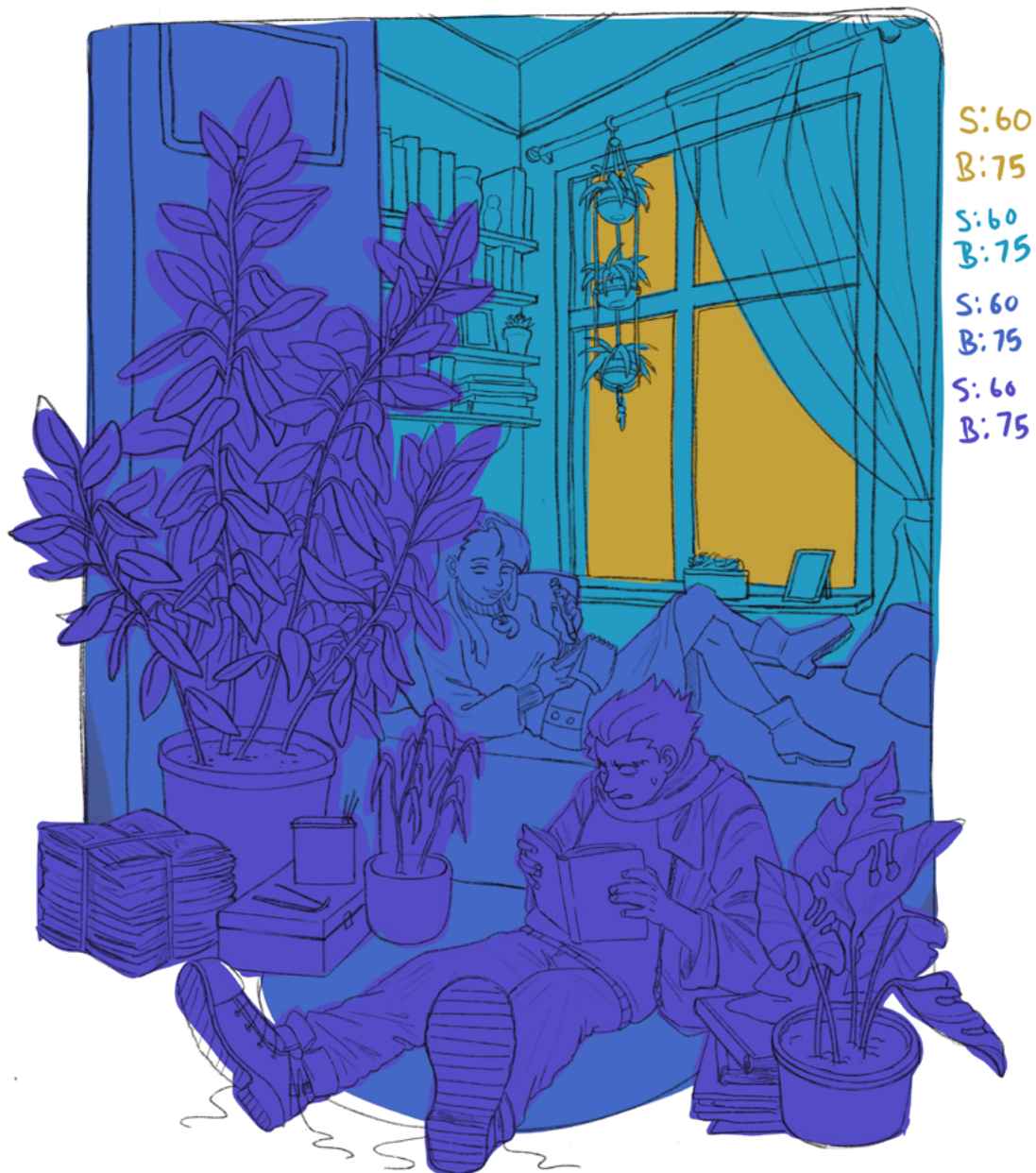
I've got the saturation and brightness written up in the right hand side here, as a holdover from when I was making these examples and this was all much more complex. Just know that all of the colors present in this image are exactly as light and exactly as vibrant as each other (sort of). The only thing setting them apart is hue. The yellow feels brighter than the blues just due to the property of the color itself and because we've got a pretty instinctual inclination to perceive cooler colors as shadowy and warmer colors as bright. There's plenty of contrast in this image despite no value changes happening. (Value in digital color space is really weird. there's a TON im simplifying here, but that's its own tutorial.)

As a mostly irrelevant bonus, here's the color version of the value roughs we saw earlier.

I went for green, but ended up with extremely few true greens and a lot of bluegreens and yellowgreens instead because I'm addicted to pairing blue and yellow together. The heart wants what the heart wants.

In this subsection I've got one example for you outside of my own art to really emphasize the point I'm making.

Really beautiful stuff. Look at how the teal and orange just make each other feel so rich and vibrant. (The teals are actually pretty low saturation because they don't need to be super saturated to get this effect. But anyway) Now imagine how much less impactful this would be if that part was orange. Actually hold on, there's no need to make you imagine this. I'm going to go do some really crude photoshopping here.

Okay, you see what I mean right? Like one of these just reads way better. Honestly I probably could have just cut the colors I did up there and just showed you this image, but that'd feel kind of incongruent with the rest of the section.

And that just about does it for illustrations. That's all I have for you! Congratulations! Go draw something now! If you want to. Or, you can keep reading to see me talk about comics, which takes everything we've learned here and shakes it up a little. The 'visual narrative' subsection is applicable to illustration as well, because that's talking about implicit meaning in composition, but it felt most at home with the rest of the comic stuff. So feel free to read that if you're interested. Otherwise, a sincere thanks for getting this far.

VI. COMICS

A necessary caveat for this section. I don't say this to undermine any of the advice I'm about to give you – I think it's good advice, or I wouldn't be giving it – but I do want to contextualize it. I'm not really a comics person. I've never been particularly fond of reading them. I haven't studied any of their techniques in any specific way. When it comes to sequential art, I'm really much more of an animation enthusiast and the way I'm approaching comics is often meant to emulate the things I like about animation. I have no idea how the ideas I talk about here fit in with the way comics are discussed by people who enjoy them on their own merit.

However, if you're reading this, I'm assuming you're interested in the way my comics specifically look, and that's more than something I'm qualified to speak on. We're going to be retreading some ground we've already covered and seeing how it applies specifically for comics, then we'll move on to talking about paneling and whatnot.

flow for comics

Flow in comics follows pretty much the exact same principles as it does in illustration, but with a lot more constraints. Being able to follow elements through a comic page in a specific order is, barring exception, a necessity. If people are reading the text out of order or viewing the panels out of order it's going to be incomprehensible. If your work is going to be ambiguous or otherwise difficult to engage with, that needs to be intentional, not due to negligence.

The biggest problem I see in a lot of less-solid comic compositions is that it is incredibly clear that the speech bubbles were added as an afterthought. The layout was done with some consideration for the space and transitions, but with almost zero consideration for where the text would go. This results in the text being haphazardly crammed wherever it will fit, which often results in it losing its impact.

When you're considering the layout for a comic page, speech bubbles should always be considered as one of the primary visual elements and treated as such. Not including the positioning/general shape of speech bubbles in your layouts is shooting yourself in the foot.

So with that said, flow and speech bubbles are intrinsically linked to each other in comic-making. One of the ways I'll ensure that my comic pages are flowing properly is to just stick a big visual element in them that immediately conveys the overall path you're supposed to take through the composition. from there, the speech bubbles will be read in an order dictated by the overall flow.


It's a blunt tool, but that's not a bad thing by any means. It's fun to do, it looks pleasing, and it's extremely effective.

The left drawing is very free-form and unstructed, and the right has something resembling a paneled structure, which slightly changes how the speech bubbles will be approached by your audience.

In the left example, text will just be read left to right when the viewer comes across a speech bubble. In the right example, there are two panels floating on top of the larger visual which serves as a central panel. The central zig-zag takes you between these panels, and within each panel, text will just be read from left-to-right top-to-bottom as is natural.

A lot of more traditional looking comics will rely on 'resetting' the gaze back to the left side of the page (or right, depending on what language you're reading) like a typewriter starting a new line, but this is something I've always had a really hard time with. There are a few instances of pages where I will follow this principle of resetting back to one side with more structural paneling, but I consider them to be categorically some of the weakest i've done.
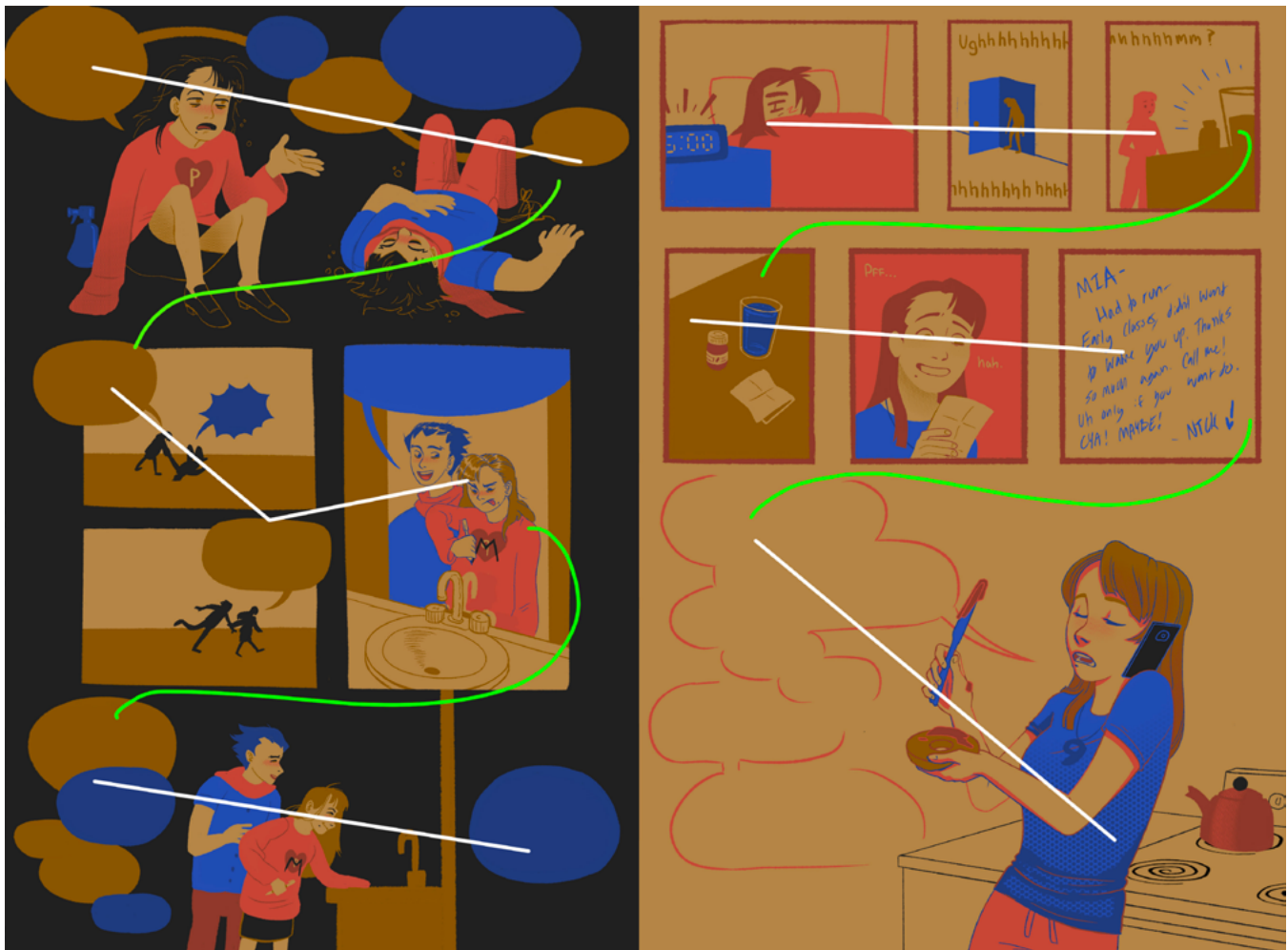
Rather, when trying to lead the eye between panels I'll try and stagger them in a zig-zagging manner instead, to emphasize their order in a way that feels more natural to how I'm inclined to look at things.

You can see here that the positioning of the speech bubbes when taken in as a whole is pretty haphazard, but the very clear order of the visuals they're attached to leaves very little ambiguity in which part of the page you're supposed to be looking at next.

Something I also do really frequently is, either instead of or in tandem with this sort of overall zig-zag positioning of the visuals, I'll make sure the speed bubbles themselves follow a big implied S-curve through the whole page. If clear progression of visuals means the speech bubbles can be placed with a bit less concern, then it holds true to a degree that the opposite works as well. If it's extremely clear what order the speech bubbles are meant to be read in, then it really doesn't matter a ton how cleanly the visuals lead into each other. Text can easily take compositional precedent just due to the fact that the brain really likes looking at letters.

There's also some more interesting stuff you can do with ordering things when there's not a strictly chronological relationship between everything being depicted. The black lines and white lines in the following compositions represent two different conversations that are happening simultaneously.

In the page on the left, it's designed to be read so that you'll follow the top black path into the white path, and then double back to read the column on the left, which is isolated from the rest. However, if someone was inclined to reset their line of sight to the left of the page and read the column first, they wouldn't be missing anything. On the right page, the dialogue is split into four alternating diagonal paths. The two paths in the middle both begin at a higher point on the page than the previous path ends. If this were one continuous conversation, it'd be a huge problem, because it makes for a very counterintuitive flow. Since these are two separate conversations I can get away with it.

Of course, at the end of the day, positioning speech bubbles is far from the only thing that matters. This is all building on the understanding of flow we established earlier. A lot of comic layouts are going to rely on the relationship between the speech bubbles and the other visual elements to properly guide the eye through the page.

Pretty straightforward stuff!

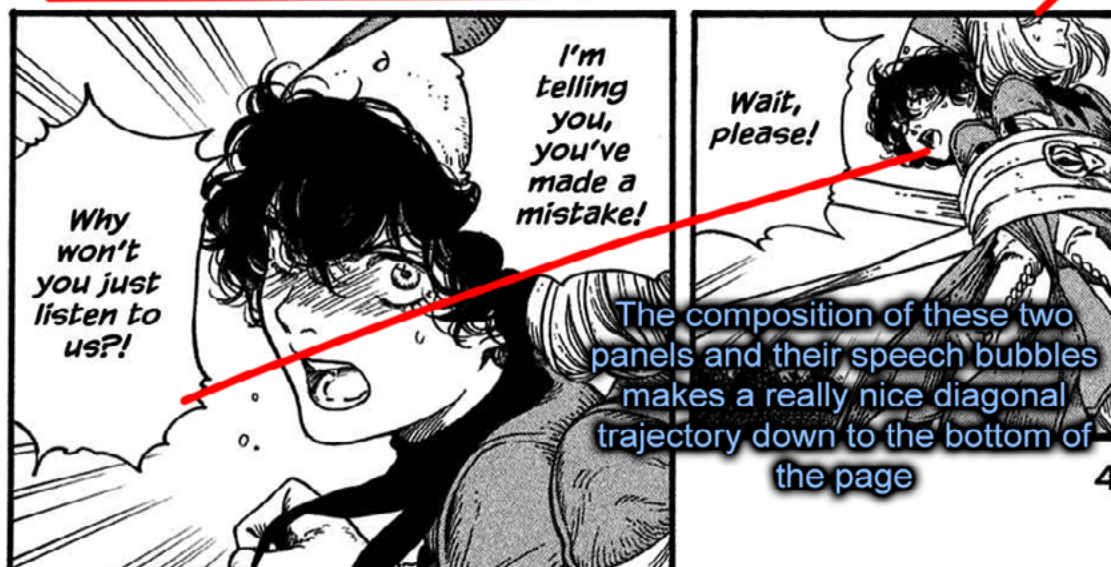Now, let's see how a professional does it. We're gonna look at a couple of pages from Kamome Shirahama's Witch Hat Atelier manga. It's absolutely stunning art, seriously a compositional master class in its own right. It's really well written too. You should just go read it. She's particularly adept at establishing a strong sense of flow within a page. I'll break down exactly what's happening here.

Since manga reads right to left, our gaze starts at the speech bubble and the gesture of the arm brings us right down to coco's face.

Do not be afraid.

from there, the staff guides the eye effortlessly to the next speech bubble.

(Note that the drapery in this panel serves to break up the negative space really well!)

In this panel, we're inclined to follow the speech bubbles across the illustration.

The larger gap between this panel and the next two instructs us to 'reset' our gaze to the right hand side of the page

You will simply become an "unknowing".

When I erase your memories of magic,

even the terror that you now feel will be forgotten.

I'm telling you, you've made a mistake!

Wait, please!

Why won't you just listen to us?!

The composition of these two panels and their speech bubbles makes a really nice diagonal trajectory down to the bottom of the page

4

Starting with the sound effects in the top right leading down through the first two speech bubbles, this page effortlessly makes use of a beautiful little loop-de-loop in it's composition, bringing you down to the next panel.

The simple but energetic shapes in the upper panel guide us back to the speech bubbles, which then cross panel boundaries and make a diagonal that continues through the lower panel's illustration.
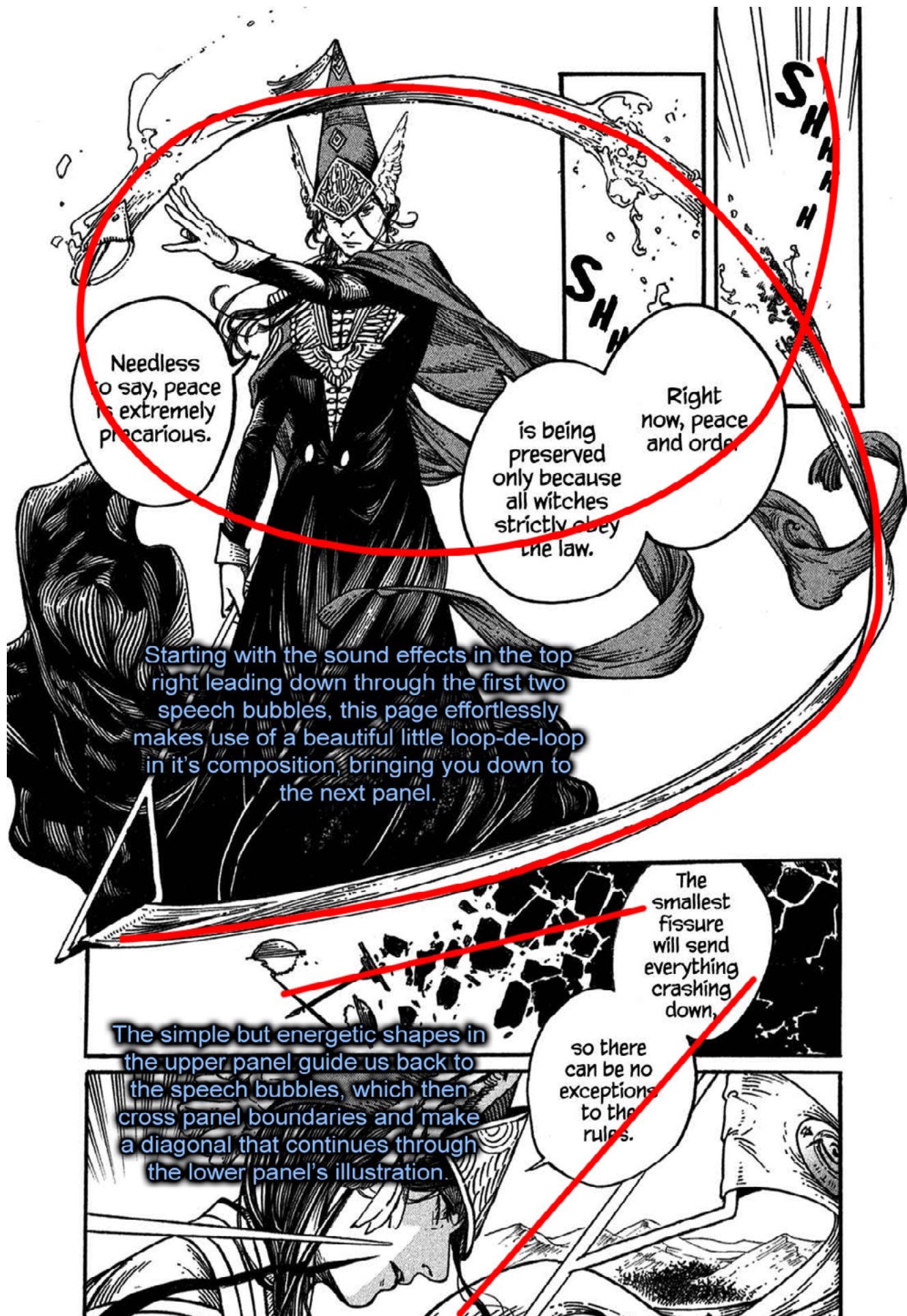
tangents for comics

Once again, there's not really a huge amount to be said about tangents. You know my rules for tangents. The only thing different about tangents when it comes to comics is that these rules need to hold true both within panels, between panels, and everywhere the speech bubbles come into contact. I really just want to emphasize the speech bubble thing again. Your speech bubbles are not immune to tangents! In fact they are often very prone to them!

Anyway, I'm just gonna show a couple of pages blocked out by what I'd consider to be a "panel" in the more abstract way I do paneling, and how those larger shapes interact with each other. It's a rough blocking, but it gets the point across. This is more about breaking down the larger shape areas and their relations than painstakingly tracing over everything I've already drawn. You get the picture.

There's actually an intentional tangent here in this last one. In the top left, the dark red 'panel' and the blue 'panel' intersect because they're supposed to be sharing a physical space, just not necessarily in the way they're being depicted here.

I definitely still mess up a lot and either miss or can't quite fix all my tangents. Next up is one of the most visually complex pages in the entire comic, a page that has a massive amount of overlap and is ripe for tangents. I've put a little green overlay anywhere where there's a tangent.

It''s fourteen by my count. Which is not great. But overall I still think this is a pretty strong composition. You gotta pick your battles and I already spent way more time on this than I'll normally give to a single page.

This section is really less of an explanation of anything new and more of a gentle reminder to always keep these shape relations at the forefront of your mind when you're working. Now let's get into the real meat of things.

narrative and paneling

In short, my single main philosophy for making my comics is: how little can I draw to convey the necessary information I'm trying to convey? This forces me to rely very heavily on non-literal visuals and to just allow the context surrounding that the elements I do draw to convey the intended physical space the characters exist in/the events taking place. The way I draw this comic is designed to be as fast and efficient as possible. I've already spent hundreds and hundreds of hours drawing it and I'm nowhere near finished. Ideally, some day, I'd like to finish, but it's a marathon, not a sprint.

This need for efficient storytelling requires some pretty unconventional use of composition. There are times when I want to essentially condense the equivalent of a montage into just a few snapshots of imagery in a single page or spread. Oftentimes, being able to cover large amounts of time and narrative in a single page involves completely abandoning anything resembling traditional comic layout. For these 'montage' pages, I don't really include much in the way of paneling because it forces too much structure onto them. Let's take a look.

This page is a really egregious example. I've shown one without the speech bubbles so you can see the figures a bit clearer. Originally I had planned for a several page long sequence that conveyed the back-and-forth these particular characters had been having for this time period, but when it came time to draw it, even the thought of it exhausted me, so I decided to get it out however I could. What I settled for were these alternating silhouettes, each one very subtly different from any other to imply different clothes – there's a passage of time happening. The speech bubbles are scattered and each one contains snippets of a different, unrelated conversation.

This spread that we've seen a couple times before accomplishes something similar.

I keep this comic within the constraints of a limited palette because it makes my workflow easier, but it's not the same palette the entire way through. This page is the point where the old palette switches out for the new one. It is the entirety of how I've chosen to depict a period of around a year or two that I've otherwise completely skipped over. While this is by no means a simple drawing, it is much quicker and simpler way of implying two years worth of time than drawing even a single-percentage fraction of the events that could have happened in that window. I could have gotten away with something much simpler, but this is the kind of thing I enjoy drawing so I gave it a bit more time and care than was strictly utilitarian.

The large abstracted scattering of these visuals gives a very unspecific impression about how the characters spent their time during this period. That's what the zero-panel pages do on the macro scale; they abandon specific chronological, spatial, and narrative relationships between visuals. It becomes up to the viewer to determine exactly what it means, and there's room for a wide berth of interpretation, so this isn't really suitable for narrative elements you want tight reins on. If you leave things up to interpretation, it will be misinterpreted by at least a few people. On the other hand, painstaking, granular explanations of everything you wish to convey make for extremely bland and condescending art to engage with. Pick your battles.

If you do wish to be painstaking and granular (I often do!) you can accomplish that with a zero-panel page as well. These types of compositions in composition work great for the macro, and for the micro. Dedicating an entire page to a specific action or moment allows you to fully emphasize that specific beat. Pages like the last one are quick and phrenetic. They're noise. Pages like the following examples are quiet and still. They're pauses.

These two pages convey very little information relative to the amount of space they take up. They're just snapshots, but the fact that we're taking the space to zoom in on these particular snapshots means that what little information is there is important.

So whereas having an entire page without panels is effective for a lot of storytelling purposes, and for me, much easier to draw, they're not gonna be where the meat of a longform comic lies. A comic is about sequencing. In order for a narrative to meaningfully function, you have to have a way to convey specific events in a specific order. That's where paneling comes in.

As I've already mentioned, I'm terrible at paneling. I don't like doing it and it doesn't look good when I try. That's why most of my comic exists in the middle ground between fully unstructured visuals on a page and more traditional paneling. Let's look at what I'd consider to be pages that are more typical of how I normally work.

In both of these panels we have areas that establish the physical space or context of the actual sequence of events happening. Then, panels are added around that contextualizing visual that break down the more specific actions of the characters without having to worry about depicting them in relation to that space every time. Drawing several panels inside of a room is exhausting to me. Drawing one or two panels inside of a room and then drawing a bunch around it that depict people talking and moving in a void is much easier and much more fun.

The trick here isn't my specific ratio of rooms-to-people, the trick is that things you enjoy drawing are easier and quicker to draw. Find a general way to structure a sequence of events that involves drawing as much of the stuff you like drawing and as little of the stuff you dislike drawing as physically possible, and make that your 'default' manner of constructing a page. From there, once you have a baseline structure you feel capable of working in, that's where you can begin to get really creative and push that sort of formatting for as much as it's worth.

Another guiding principle for the way I draw this comic is what can I use to segment space that's not just a rectangular panel? People seem to really enjoy the wackier visuals, which I'm grateful for, because I get just so bored drawing rectangles and stuff. There's only so many ways I can think of to make it look interesting. This also gives you a chance to add more meaning to a given panel. A rectangle is the utilitarian, baseline shape for a comic panel, which means every instance of a non-rectangular panel comes with extra impact – the viewer is forced to consider it more specifically.

On the left page, the conversation happening up top has the characters drawn as playing cards rather than just showing them standing and speaking to each other, because this scene is about card games. The central element of the people playing cards at the table both serves as the contextualizing visual, and separates the space so the figures at the bottom don't need a fresh panel. On the right, instead of showing what's happening in panels, the visuals are stuck in the hospital monitors which have been a recurring visual and were more concretely established in earlier pages of this scene.

That's the thing that makes more abstracted compositions fun – not only is narrative delivered through what's being depicted, it can be delivered through how those visuals are depicted. Here's an example of a little compositional trick I use a few times.

These pages make use of these exaggerated nesting verticals. Not only do the strict vertical walls of these compositions crush the things inside of them into a tense claustrophobia, they're designed to mimic elevator doors closing. This character has a lot of trauma tied up in elevators, and is terrified of them, so every time he's having a little bit of a Complete Freakout for whatever reason, I bring the elevator imagery into play to emphasize that narratively.

Even if the viewers don't come in with that character knowledge, if I then explicitly discuss it at a later point in this comic, these pages retroactively gain that meaning. It might still be overlooked on an initial viewing, or go over some people's heads entirely, but once again, we have to accept the fact that unless we want to be condescendingly blunt we can not guar–antee our full intentions will always come across. Since I do a lot of fanart I can operate under the assumption that my primary audience under–stands most of my symbolism, but for original works it becomes necessary to develop your own visual langue and imbue it with meaning.

There plenty of ways of making your composition itself meaningful that don't rely on pulling pre-existing meaning from somewhere else. Repeating a page layout is a great way to make narrative parallels painfully obvious in a way that's still tasteful and enjoyable to look at, and assign meaning to those sets of visuals. When similar events are treated with similar visuals, it conveys an awareness of the larger rhythm of your comic as a whole that strengthens it as a collective body of work.


This is a very specific example – two instances of a character seeing another on life support in the hospital. The narrative parallels would still be extremely obvious even without the identical page layout, but I'm not here to be subtle. I'm here to be impactful. However, even with stuff that's much less of a direct 1:1 equivalent, repeating compositions works.
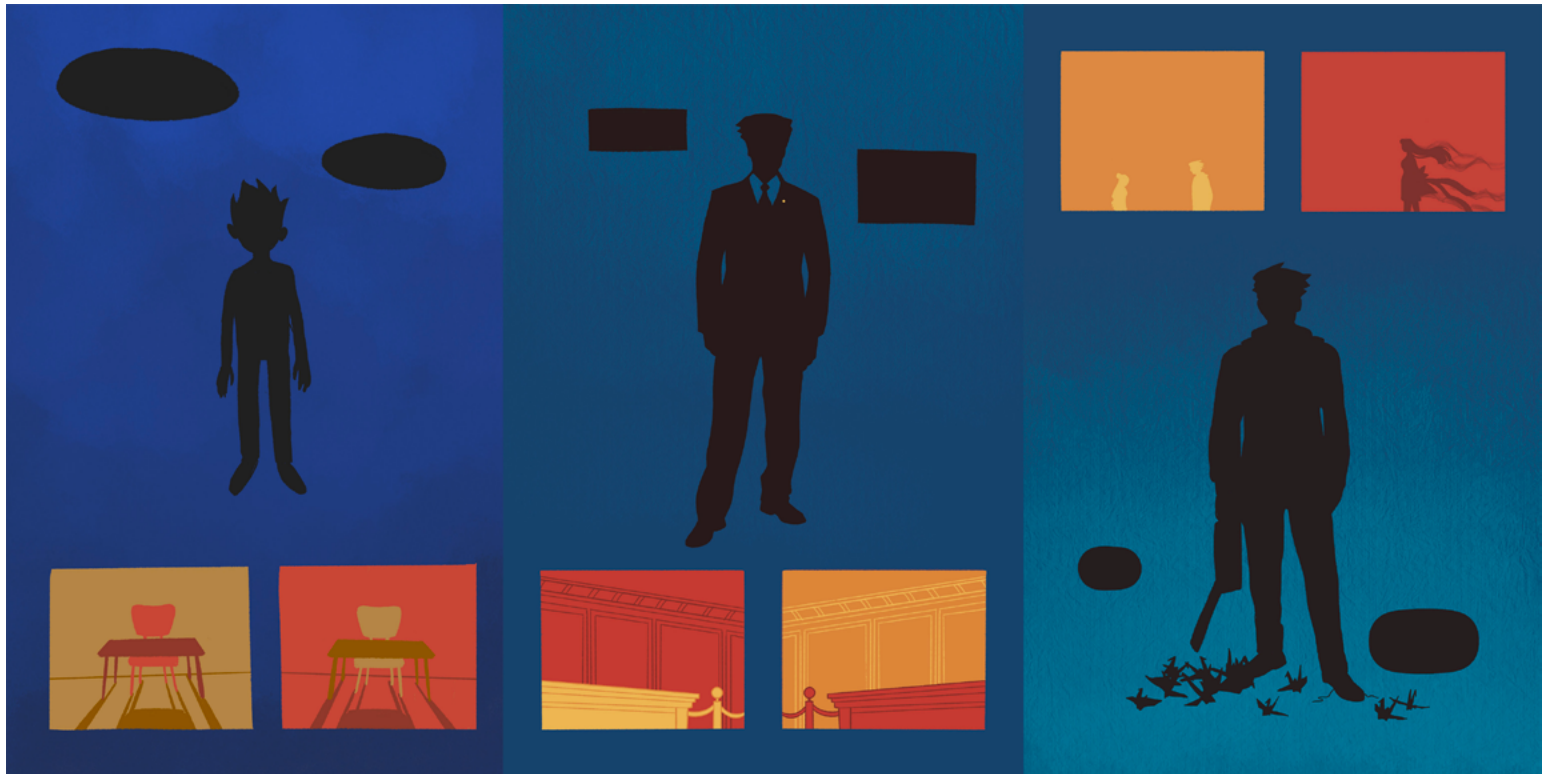
This composition is pretty bare-bones as far as things go. The last one inverts the central figure and the accenting panels, but their relationship to each other is still obvious. Rather than trying to imply specific situations that repeat, these pages are used to display three very different situations where the character's emotional state is the same. Unlike the last composition, which included the specific hospital elements as part of its layout, this composition lacks any inherent narrative impact. The central figure is nowhere in particular, and the two additional panels are just rectangles that could contain whatever is relevant at that specific moment, but mean nothing on their own. The only meaning that exists in this layout is the meaning it's given by context and repetition.

Repeating visuals don't have to be this exact and obvious, either. Layouts can invoke each other without identical layous like these pages and the hospital pages, or without sharing a visual concept like the elevator pages. They can just share a similar consideration for space.
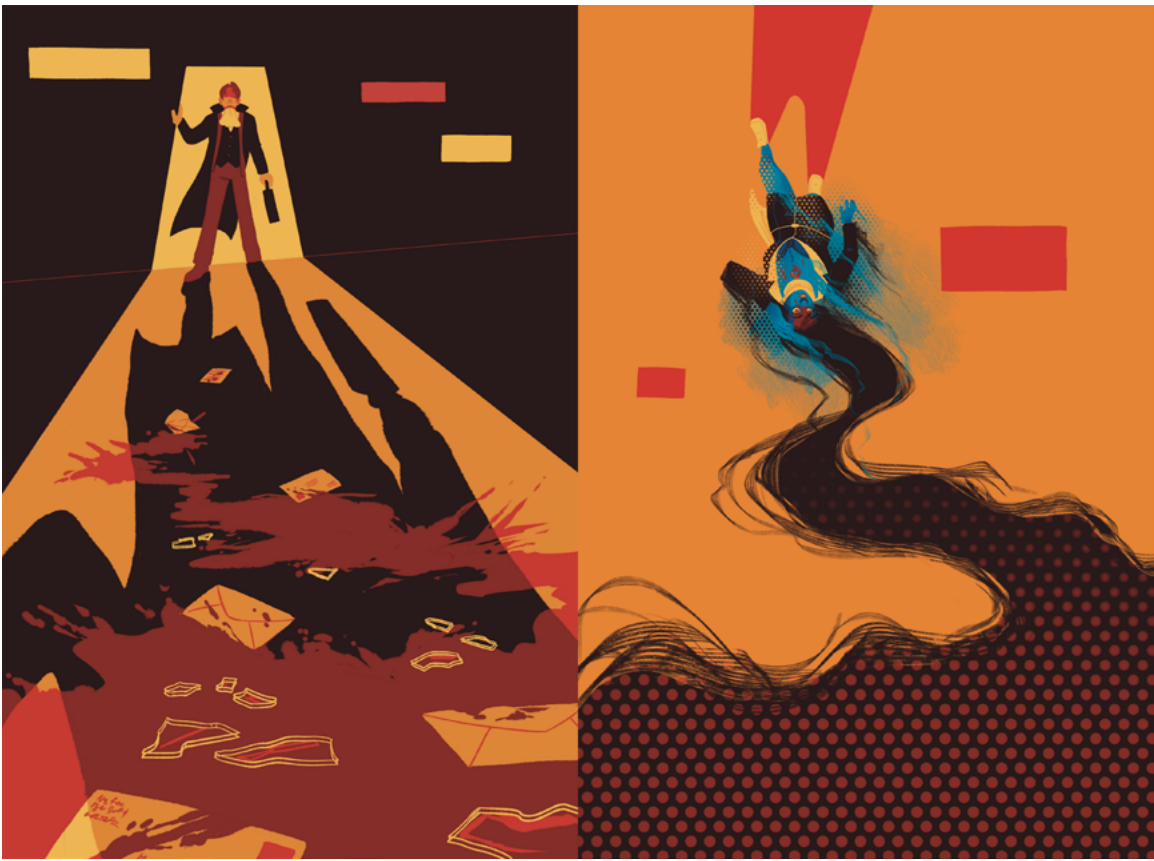
These two pages were designed to echo each other. You can see like this that they use the space in the page in a very similar way, and have a nearly identical sense of flow. But actually, this page on the right is flipped to how it appears in the comic.
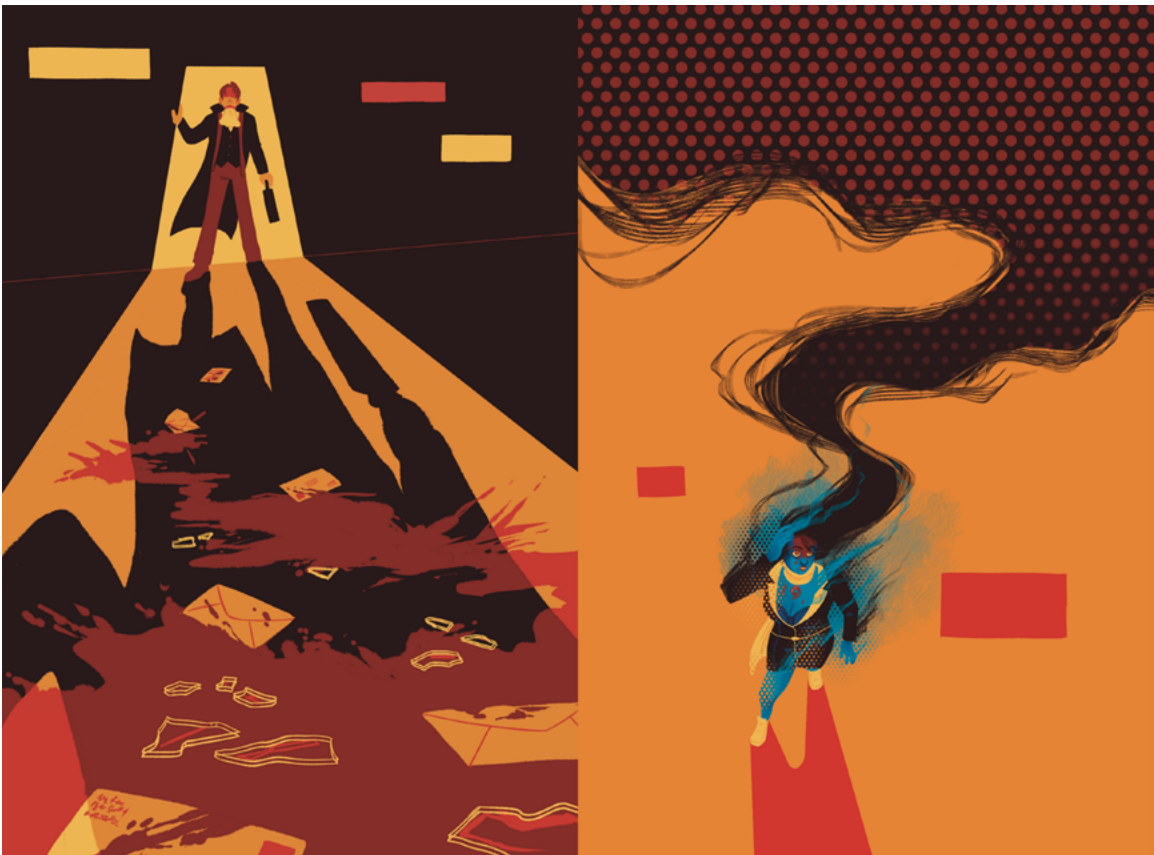
Like this, the relationship between these pages is much less obvious. There's a very high chance that without it being pointed out, nobody would ever even notice. But that's okay with me. Despite it being much much more subtle than most of my compositional trickery, I do think these pages end up with a similar vibe. Even if people don't pick up on that consciously or can't articulate why this is the case, I think it's doing its job.

Even after publishing the draft of this writeup, I've had people ask me to further explain the way I panel my comics but I truly think this is the most I am capable of doing so. The way I use visuals is inextricable from the story I am attempting to tell – all I can offer you is general guidelines. I'll do my best to summarize the guidelines I've just given you before we go.

1. Understand that speech bubbles have heavy influence on your composition and take advantage of this.
2. Don't treat panels as discrete visuals; all of the panels on a page are working in tandem and need to interact with each other in a way that reflects that. Keep their tangents in mind.
3. Abandon the typical sequencing of comic pages if you're conveying information that doesn't require portraying events in a specific order
4. As much as is physically possible, construct your compositions in a way that lets you draw as much of the stuff you enjoy drawing as possible, and as little of everything else.
5. Try and find ways to frame thing that aren't just rectangular panels. Get creative with what shapes or elements you can use to section off space in a page.
6. The layout of a page can convey meaning outside of the events shown in the panels. Build up this meaning through repetition, or by invoking visuals your audience would already be familiar with the meaning of.
7. Repeat visuals when you repeat narrative events or emotional moments. This serves to strengthen a sequential work beyond anything that could be accomplished in a single drawing.

For some inspiration, I'll show you a few more pages from Witch Hat. It just looks really good, guys, you should read it.

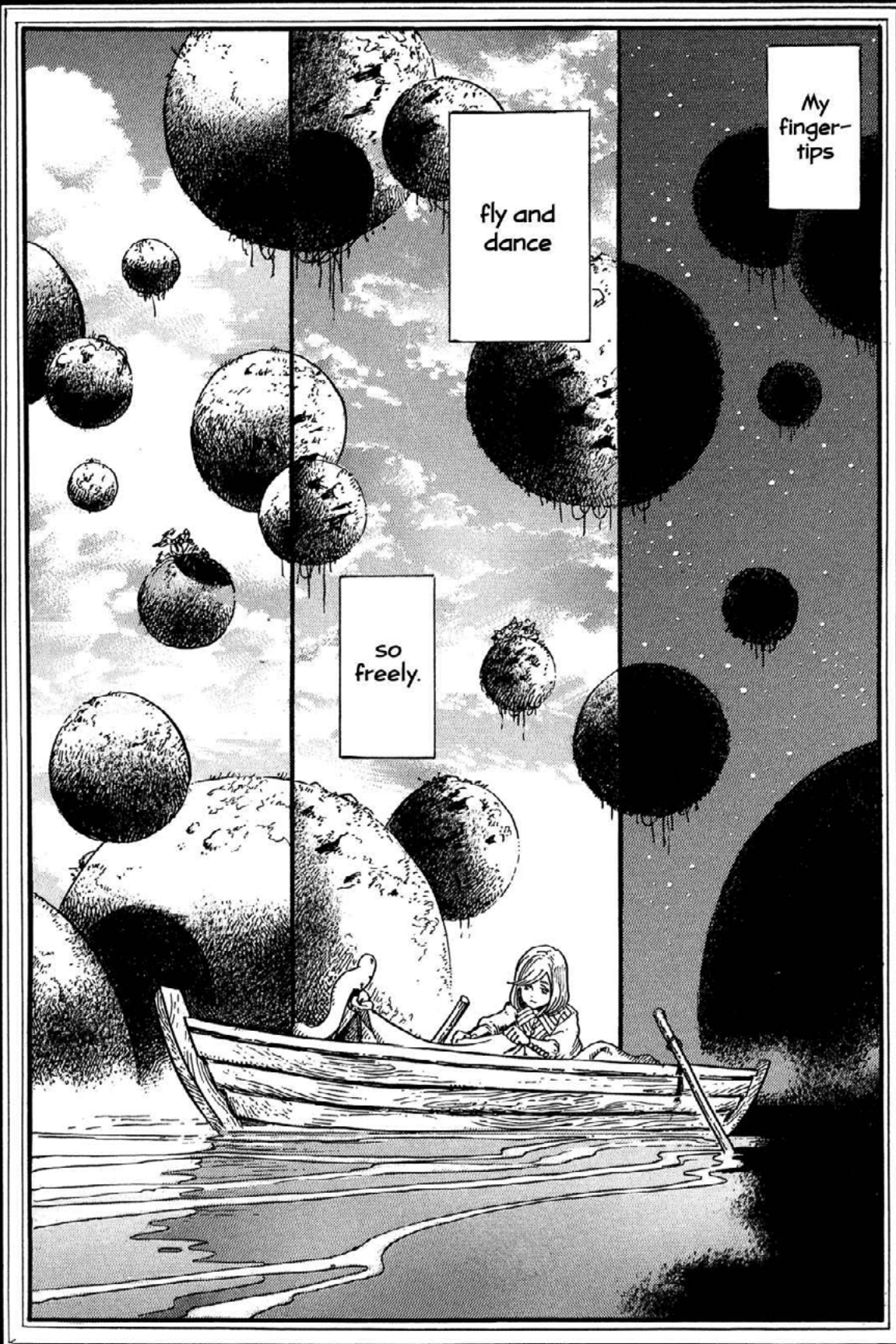The prosperous people of the Romonneau Chasm-City

resided in these caves, crafting their delicate magic.

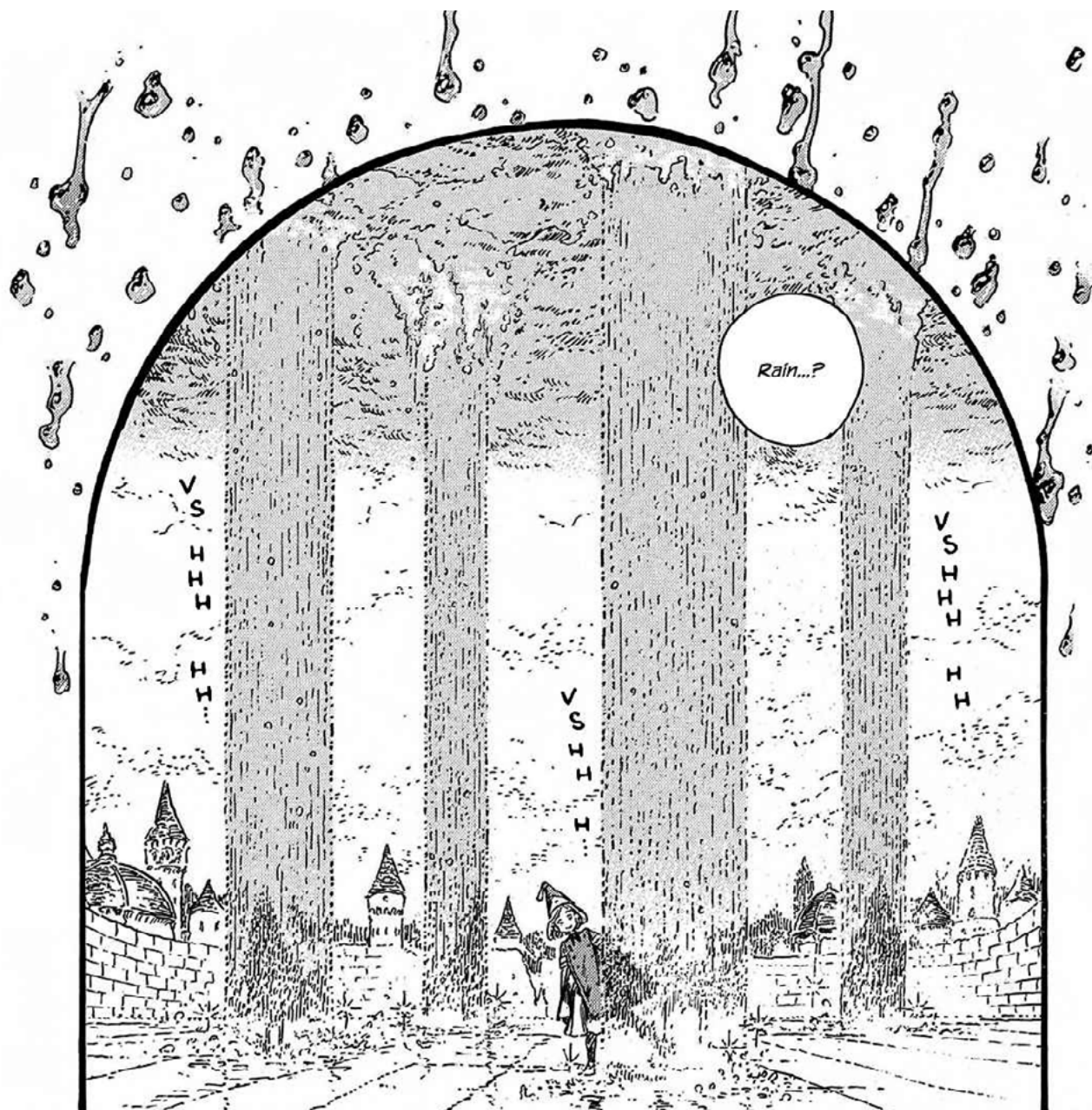Adorning themselves in gold and jewels, they made no attempt to hide their opulence.

Citizens of other countries and visitors to the city

were shunned and looked down upon...

Rain...?

VSHHH HH

VSHH H

VSHHH HH

splash!

But one sight you never find at the bottom of the sea...

The Assembly is filled with magic of all kinds,

A golem!?

This magic is ancient... forbidden... it should be long for-gotten!

This must be the Brimhats...!!
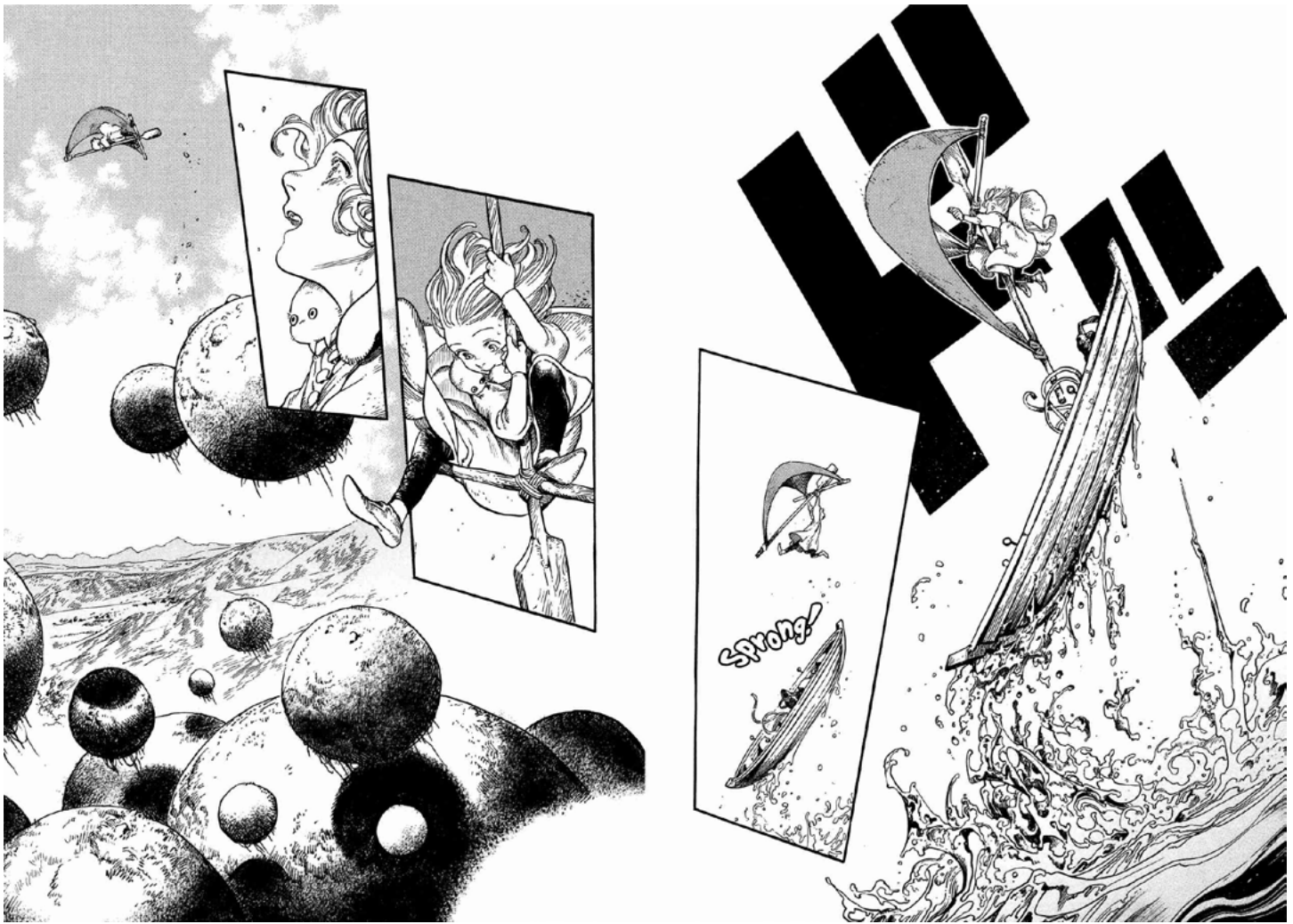
Uah-!

THUNK!

Professor Qifrey!!

Ooooh. Ahhh. So pretty. Great stuff, right? You wanna read it. You wanna read it so bad.

Okay, that's it for real now.

Thank you to anyone who expressed interest in hearing about comic stuff from me. The reception for this comic has been so far above and beyond anything I ever thought would happen, and it means a lot.

I hope you've managed to find something helpful or otherwise impactful somewhere within this beast of a thing! My intent is to continue making tutorials/writeups like this in the future covering any subject I feel capable of discussing in depth, so if you're interested in seeing more, you can find me a few places around the web to keep up with what I'm doing.